# THE BROKEN BUDDHA
## Critical Reflections on Theravada and a Plea for a New Buddhism

by S. Dhammika

## Preface

Most of this book was written in 2001 although I was still tinkering with it three years later. After its completion I hesitated for a long time about publishing it, thinking that it might do more harm than good. Eventually, an a unauthorized draft appeared on the internet without either my permission or knowledge forcing me to publish the finished work. I had hoped that, if and when the book came out, to circulate it only within the Buddhist community. That is no longer possible. As it is, enough people, including a dozen or so Western monks and former Western monks, have convinced me that many of the things I have said need saying. I am fully aware that I am risking my reputation, the friendship of some people and perhaps a lot more by writing what I have and I expect to become the target of some very angry comments. My only hope is that *The Broken Buddha* will provoke wide-ranging, thoughtful and realistic discussion amongst Western Buddhists about the future of the Triple Gem in the West.

## Introduction

There is no law in history which guarantees that
Buddhism will grow roots in the West or advance
beyond its present infantile stage. But one would
expect that it will grow more conscious of its own
difficulties and Buddhists will awaken to the
problems which Buddhism itself thrusts upon
man as an essential part of its treasure. One would
also hope that doubt should appear as the sign
of a deeper conviction. Luis O. Gomez

In the southwestern suburbs of Mandalay is a temple enshrining one of the most famous and revered Buddha statue in the world, the Mahamuni Image. According to legend, this statue is actually a portrait of the Buddha himself although its real origins are lost in time. For centuries it was kept in Arakhan until King Bodawpaya of Burma invaded the country with the specific intention of getting the statue for himself. Having defeated the Arakhanese and decimated their land the king had the huge statue dragged over the mountains at great loss of life and then enshrined in the temple where it sits today. In 1973 during my first visit to Mandalay I got the opportunity to see this famous statue. I had asked two Burmese I had met if they would take me to see it and they were only too happy to show their new ‘white Buddhist’ friend the country’s most sacred icon. They led me through a hall crowded with devotees and eventually we entered the *sanctum sanctorum*. It was something of an anticlimax. Rather than the graceful image I had expected, a squat and somewhat ungainly form loomed up before me. The face was pleasant enough but the rest of its body was lumpy and misshapen. It took me a few minutes to figure out the reason for this. Men clamored over the statue (women are forbidden to touch it) placing the small squares of gold leaf on it which devotees passed up to them. Over the centuries the gradual accumulation of this gold has formed a thick uneven crust over the statue so as to obscure its original shape. Since that time I have often thought that the Mahamuni Image could be a metaphor of what has happened to the teaching of the Buddha itself.

In 2001 I had been a monk in the Theravadin tradition for twenty five years as well as reaching the conventional halfway point in my life, having also had my fiftieth birthday. It seemed a good time to asses my life and my practice up to then as well as to give some thought to where the two might go in the future. Even before I became a monk I had reservations about some of the things I had

seen during my stays in Thai and Laotian monasteries. This didn't deter me from ordaining though. Corruption and misunderstandings exist in all religions, I thought, and it wouldn't be too difficult to find those who practiced the true Theravada. As it happened it was quite difficult to find such people. But more disappointing, when I did meet dedicated and sincere Theravadins all too often they seemed to give exaggerated importance to things which, to me at least, appeared to be little more than rituals and formalities. I recall visiting a tea plantation one afternoon with the late Venerable Sivali of Khandaboda, a dedicated monk and skillful meditation teacher. The manager of the plantation walked a quarter of a mile down the steep hillside to welcome us and then asked if we would like a cup of tea. We said yes and he walked back up the hill to his bungalow, prepared our tea and brought it down to us. As I sipped mine I noticed that Sivali was looking rather coy and not drinking his. I looked at the tea, saw that it had milk in it and knew straight away why.* A few minutes later the manager also noticed that Sivali was not drinking his tea and came over to see what the problem was. Sivali gently told him and the solicitous and embarrassed man took his cup, threw the tea out and ran all the way back up the hill to get him another one without milk in it. If an ordinary person were as fussy about not having milk in their tea after midday we would dismiss it as just a silly eccentricity. But why would an otherwise decent intelligent person dedicated to the practice of letting go, being content with what is and developing a kind heart be prepared to cause embarrassment and inconvenience over such a minor thing? To be able to answer this question is to understand the very essence of Theravada but this dawned on me only gradually. As it did I decided to just do my own practice and try to have as little contact with institutional Theravada as possible. But being a monk in a Theravadin land this proved easier said than done.

*According to the Vinaya, milk is a food and so to drink tea with milk in the afternoon is to break the rule against eating after midday.

Quite understandably, Asian Theravadins expect you to follow their traditions and not question them. You can point out that certain practices or ideas are not in the Tipitaka or are even contrary to it but it will make no difference. Right or wrong, inane or practical, that's how it has always been done and that's what you must do. In 1996 I traveled in Europe for the first time thus giving me the opportunity to see how Theravada was understood and practiced there. Theravada in Asia might be hidebound and fossilized I thought but at least Westerners will have been able to separate the fruit from the peel, the gift from the wrapping, the Buddha from 'the thick uneven crust' surrounding him. To my astonishment and despair I found that this was not so. Most groups, centers and monasteries I visited adhered to such practices with even more tenacity than in Asia. I finally had to admit that this *is* Theravada and reluctantly and with some sadness decided that I could not be a part of it any longer. I began telling anyone who might be interested that I did not consider myself or want to be considered by others to be a Theravadin monk. In fact I had probably never really been one anyway, not a good one at least. When I mentioned this to a friend he asked 'Then what sort of monk are you?' I wasn't prepared for this question but after thinking about it for a while I decided that I did not have to align myself with any school. Now I follow the Buddha's teachings to the best of my understanding and to the best of my ability. What follows are thoughts and observations on the Theravada tradition that I have formed over the last twenty five years, some of the experiences that have led to them and some suggestions about the possible future of the Dhamma in the West.

It may be that some will see the following reflections as just an angry parting shot. They are not although it is true that putting them down on paper was to some extent a catharsis. I am convinced that the Buddha's teachings really are 'beautiful in the beginning, the middle and the end' and that they can offer a credible answer to the spiritual crisis in the West. However, I also believe that a major obstacle to the growth of the Dhamma outside its traditional homeland is the highly idealized view most Westerners have of Theravada in Asia. This all too often means that they adopt the Dhamma together with outdated practices and misunderstandings that have built up around it. If this persists the Dhamma will never really take root in the West. Worse, Westerners may just perpetuate many of the problems that plague Theravada in Asia. Consequently these reflections will also

attempt to show what Theravada really is, how it got like that and suggests ways of bringing it closer to the spirit of the Buddha's teachings so that it can become revenant to a non-traditional environment.

Few of my observations about Theravada are original, they are the sort of things one often hears about it from former Theravadins, Mahayanists and others. Nor are they particularly contemporary. In the famous *Vimalakirtinidesa Sutra* for example, a Mahayana work dating from the early centuries of the Common Era, the layman Vimalakirti pretends to be sick and the Buddha one by one asks the monks to go and visit him. Each of them refuses because they know Vimalakirti is wiser than they and the idea of being seen learning from a lay person is too much for their monkish self image. But the Buddha is insistent and so they decide to go all together. Many of Vimalakirti's friends have also come to see him and so he takes the opportunity to teach the Dhamma. But just as he begins there is a disturbance in the audience. Sariputta, here representing the archetypal 'Hinayana' monk, cannot find a chair that will make him higher than the lay people in the audience so Vimalakirti magically manifests 'allowable' furniture and then begins his sermon. Half way through Sariputta interrupts the Dhamma talk yet again. Vimalakirti asks what the problem is this time and Sariputta replies that he and the other monks must eat before noon and the time is getting near. Vimalakirti manifests food for the monks and while they tuck in he continues expounding the good Dhamma. When the sermon is finally finished the heavens open and celestial blossoms fall from the sky and stick to the congregation. Sariputta and the other monks indignantly brush the blossoms off saying as they do, 'We monks are not allowed to decorate ourselves.' Although in less exalted settings, such behavior could be observed in a Theravadin monastery even today, even in the West.

These reflections are not concerned with the abuses and corruption that infest Theravada and I will elude to such things only in passing. It is not the failure to practice Theravada that is my main concern, but its proper practice and the problems arising there from. Many will accuse me of focusing too much on the negative and of failing to mention that despite the problems there are still enough monks and lay people who practice with understanding. But the good in Theravada, and of course there is a good side, is already well-known, in fact it is the only side that is known. Almost all discourse on Theravada presents the exceptional as the normal and the ideal as the actual. The massive problems that beset Theravada are ignored, denied, sidestepped or more usually just passed over in silence. Hopefully, my reflections will help to give a more balanced picture of the situation. Some of my observations might apply equally as well to Mahayana, especially Tibetan Buddhism. However, there are thoughtful Western Vajirayanists who are beginning to question certain aspects their own tradition and are better placed to comment on it than I. Neither have I discussed fully the problems surrounding meditation in Theravada. This subject is of such a crucial importance that it deserves to be explored in depth and this I hope to do at some time in the future.

I have quoted frequently from several books, in particular *The Buddhist Monastic Code* by Thanissaro Bhikkhu and *The Buddhist Monk's Discipline – A Layman's Guide* by Ariyeseko, both of which represent the orthodox Theravadin standpoint. I have disagreed with most of what these venerable authors say which I hope will not be taken as disrespect towards them personally. However, the Buddha's teachings are rich enough to allow for a broader interpretation and I think that an alternative to the Theravada position is long overdue. I also quote often from Milford Spiro's *Buddhism and Society*, an anthropological study of Theravada in its Burmese setting. Spiro observations are of value not just because they often coincide with my own, but because they are those of an objective observer with no ax to grind. Finally, it only remains to say that I hope my comments about lay people pampering monks are not mistaken for ingratitude on my part. In my years in Sri Lanka numerous people, from the Colombo 7 crowd to simple pious villagers have always treated me with the utmost generosity and kindness and for this I will be forever grateful. However it is time to part company. I must walk another path.

**What Is Theravada?**

The Pali word thera means elder and refers to a monk who has been ordained for ten years or more while the word vada means opinion or view. Therefore the name Theravada could be translated as the Doctrine or View of the Elder Monks. Theravadians claim that their version of the Dhamma correspond exactly to the Buddha's teachings as recorded in the Pali Tipitaka but this is true only to a certain extent. It would be more correct to say that Theravada is a particular interpretation of certain teachings from the Pali Tipitaka. The Pali Tipitaka contains a truly amazing variety of material from ethics to epistemology, from psychology to practical wisdom. It would be very difficult to encompass all this material into a single school or system and indeed Theravadins have certainly not done this. Rather, they have emphasized some of the Buddha's doctrines and ideas and de-emphasized or even ignored others. For example, the four Expressions of Sympathy (sangha vatthuni) are frequently mentioned by the Buddha and could have important implications for a deeper understanding of love and compassion, particularly their social application. Mahayana used them to developed a whole philosophy of practical altruism but they are given almost no attention in Theravada. I notice that they are not included in Nanatiloka's *Dictionary* and in thirty years of reading Theravadian literature I can never recall having seen them discussed or even referred to. To give another example. One of the central concepts of the Buddha's teachings is dependent origination. There are two versions of this doctrine – one showing the arising of suffering and the other showing the arising of liberation and freedom. The first of these is arguably the most well known, although not necessarily well understood, of all Buddhist doctrines. It features in virtually every book on Theravada, it is commonly depicted diagrammatically in charts and temple wall paintings and its twelve constituents are often chanted by monks during ceremonies. The second and one would think the more important of the two is virtually unknown, even by quite learned Theravadins. Bhikkhu Bodhi, the only Western Theravadin to ever draw attention to this important schema of dependant origination, says that 'traditional commentators have hardly given the text the special attention it would seem to deserve.' It would be more correct to say that they have ignored it almost completely. Caroline Rhys Davids called this positive version of dependant origination an 'oasis' and asked, 'How might it have altered the whole face of Buddhism in the West if that sequence had been made the illustration of the casual law!' Indeed, how might it have altered the whole face of Theravada in Asia?

Then when we examine just how the material chosen has been interpreted we find it has frequently been done in the most literal, stilted and unimaginative way or has simply been misunderstood.* To give just two examples. The Buddha describes the enlightened person as having 'a mind with the barriers broken down' (cetasa vimariyada katena). What an extraordinary phrase! When a person has seen and seen through the conceptually created barriers of race, class, 'mine' and 'not mine' they are able to love others unconditionally. The *Visuddhimagga* tells a story to illustrate how, according to Theravada, the term 'a mind with the barriers broken down' should be understood. A monk was sitting with three others - a friend, a stranger and someone who did not like him – when they were assailed by a band of thugs who wanted to take one of the four as a sacrifice to their god. The first monk was required to select the victim but because he had 'a mind with the barriers broken down' he was literally incapable of making any distinctions between himself and the others and thus just sat there unable to make a decision. Apart from being absurdly simplistic this contradicts the Buddha's statement that a loving person would be even capable of giving his or her life for another (D.III,187). The terms papanca and papanca sanna sankha are of enormous importance in understanding meditation and psychology as taught by the Buddha. In his brilliant and groundbreaking book *Concept and Reality*, Bhikkhu Nanananda has shown that Theravada has seriously misunderstood the true significance of these terms. Interestingly, he had also shown that Mahayana preserved much of their original meaning and consequently their deeper philosophical implications.

* There are even cases where Buddhaghosa interprets the Tipitaka to mean the exact opposite of what it actually say;

see for example *Concept and Reality*, 1971, p.46.

This combination of selective emphasis and conservative, narrow or simplistic interpretation has made Theravada what it is. By highlighting different material from the Pali Tipitaka and interpreting it in different but equally or perhaps in even more valid ways, one could have quite a different type of Buddhism. And in fact this did happen. The Sravastavadians, Dharmaguptakas, Sautantikas, the Abhayagirivasins, etc, were different schools with a different 'feel' despite basing themselves on a Sutta and Vinaya Pitaka that were the same or substantially the same as the Pail ones. Unfortunately, all these schools disappeared leaving Theravadians holding the field as the sole 'orthodox' interpreters of the Buddha's teaching in its earliest form. Of course a Theravadin would say that it is dangerous or unnecessary to interpret or elaborate on the Buddha's words. But drawing deeper or broader meanings from the Buddha's words was being done even during his own lifetime. See for example how Maha Kacchyana very creatively reinterpreted one of the Buddha's sayings from the Sutta Nipata (S.III,9). It seems that when it comes to something negative or theoretical Theravadin are able to be remarkably creative. It is only with the practical, the positive or anything outside the narrow orbit in which they have chosen to operate that they seem to be lost for words. It should come as no surprise that in its two thousand year history Theravada has produced no great religious thinkers – no Augustine, Aquinas or Erasmus, no Nagarjuna, Tsong Khapa or Dogen.

In the first few centuries after the Buddha's parinirvana there were developments of doctrines and disagreements over them but these seem to have been relatively minor. Differences over Vinaya practice led to disunity within the Sangha but it is unlikely that the doctrinal differences were serious enough for the various groups to think of themselves as distinct schools. In about 270 B.C.E. the Mauryan emperor Asoka converted to Buddhism, perhaps the most important single event in the religion after the enlightenment of the Buddha himself. It appears that at least in certain circles at this time the social significance of many of the Buddha's teachings were not just being discussed but also actively applied. Asoka was an individual as deeply concerned with his own spiritual well-being as he was with that of his subjects and while he generously supported the Sangha he also did much to apply the Dhamma to the social domain. Like many lay people at the time he was also well versed in the suttas as is clear from the many words and phrases from them which appear in his edicts. Asoka convened a general council of the Sangha and although the details are scant, it seems this council expelled undisciplined monks, codified the Dhamma and sent missions throughout India and to different parts of Asia to spread the religion. The most successful of these missions was the one sent to Sri Lanka and led by Asoka's son. Buddhism was adopted as the state religion and gradually the entire Island became Buddhist. Naturally, certain practices changed to suit local conditions and as the Sri Lankan monks began exploring the Dhamma they began to interpret it according to their own understanding and experience. Politics had its influence too. As an 'official' interpretation emerged, soon to be given the name Theravada, it was patronized by the state while other interpretations received no support or were occasionally even persecuted.

From an early period the practice of meditation was given little emphasis in Sri Lanka. By the beginning of the Common Era the leading monks had decided that preserving the Dhamma was to take precedence over practicing it. This is reflected in the commentaries where it says, 'Whether there is realization or practice is not the point, learning is sufficient for the continuation of the sasana. If the wise one studies the Tipitaka he does both…Thus the sasana is made firm when learning endures.' In another place it says, 'Even if there are a 100,000 monks practicing meditation there will be no realization of the Noble Path if there is no learning.' One of the very few monastic documents from Sri Lanka that even mentions meditation, that of Mahinda IV dating from the 10th century and laying down the daily routine for monks at the great monastery at Mihintale, says that monks should rise at dawn and do the four protective meditations.* This may be evidence of genuine meditation practice but it is more likely to refer to the perfunctory few minutes of sitting with eyes closed and legs crossed after the morning puja which still passes for 'meditation' even today. The code of monastic regulations drawn up by Dimbulagala Kassapa in the 12th century says

that a monk should be directed towards meditation only if he is not bright enough to excel at studies. As a young man in the first decades of the 18th century Valivita Saranamkara traveled Sri Lanka trying to find someone who could teach him meditation, but without success. Later, he went on to become a great reformer and educator and always understood the importance meditation, but even then he could not find anyone who knew how to do it. In the numerous manuals and monastic guides he composed, Saranamkara only occasionally mentions meditation and then only in a brief and formulistic manner. All of this does not mean that there were never any meditating monks, but certainly their numbers were small and their influence on the development of Theravada minuscule. Of the vast store of Theravadin literature that has survived to the present there are no meditation manuals or other works on meditation dating from before the 20th century. It also seems that the developments of the Dhamma which had been taking place in India under Asoka were abandoned in favor more conservative, fundamentalist and clecricocentric approach. For example, Asoka's Buddhist polity was dropped in favor of the Brahminical theory and active lay involvement in the religion was discouraged.

* Recollection of the Buddha, metta meditation, the contemplation of the repulsiveness of the body and the contemplation on death.

In the 5th century C.E the monk Buddhaghosa composed commentaries on the Tipitaka in which he fixed the developments and interpretations that had taken place up till then.* Since then these commentaries have been considered the ultimate authority and Theravada has remained virtually unchanged. Richard Gombrich correctly says, 'To this day Buddhaghosa's Buddhism is in effect the unitary standard of doctrinal orthodoxy for all Theravada Buddhists.' Theravadins see the Buddha's words through the lens of these commentaries' turgid and often fantastic pedantry rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. Most Theravadins will side with Buddhaghosa's interpretation even where it contradicts the Buddha's words. The situation is in some ways similar to pre-Reformation Christianity where church tradition was considered more authoritative than scripture. At a later period sub-commentaries were written on the commentaries and in turn commentaries on those were composed but these consisted mainly of comments on grammar and syntax. Until the late 19th century when Western influence began to penetrate into Buddhist Asia nearly all Theravadin scholarship was little more than what N.C.Chaudhuri called 'exegesis of exegesis.' Conservative by nature, without the insights that meditation can give and set within a extremely static society, Sri Lankan monks concentrated on preserving what had been handed down from the past rather than creating anything new. They heard and they repeated but they rarely inquired, explored or questioned. Commenting on the Mahayana term for Theravadins – 'savaka', meaning 'a hearer', Prof. Ishii says; 'This etymology of savaka captures the essential character of the Theravadin monks, men devoted to upholding the Dhamma and Vinaya preached by the Buddha. Their totally passive attitude has virtually precluded any active development of the teachings they hear.' Commenting education in pre-modern Burma, which was almost entirely religious and in the hands of the clergy, Aung San Suu Kyi says; 'Traditional Burmese education did not encourage speculation. This was largely due to the view, so universally held that it appears to be part of the racial psyche of the Burmese, that Buddhism represents the perfect philosophy. It therefore follows that there was no need either to try to develop it further or to consider other philosophies. As a result, in spite of the essential tolerance of Buddhist teachings, religion in Burma was monolithic. It had broad but inflexible boundaries. Theological disputes, which were not numerous, centered on the interpretation of the monastic code, the vinaya; so that the little sectarianism that did exist was confined to the monkhood.' Put in the present tense and applied to Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and to a lesser extent Sri Lanka too, this statement still holds true.

* Rhys Davids says of Buddhaghosa, 'Of his talent there can be no doubt, it was equaled only by his extraordinary industry. But of originality, of independent thought, there is at present no evidence.'

In Europe the church had various bodies to scrutinize new interpretations of doctrine to make sure

they accorded with orthodoxy. Nothing like this was needed in Theravada, there was nothing new. Monks frequently quarreled over the interpretation of Vinaya rules but rarely over points of Dhamma. They also produced extraordinarily little literature of enduring value. The *Milindapanha*, the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Abhidhammatthasangha* are amongst the few Theravadin works still widely read or studied today, the rest of the literature being either so excruciatingly dull, superfluous or pedantic that it adds little or nothing to an understanding of the Dhamma. It is a very meager harvest after two thousand years of scholarship. Until about the 11th century Theravada was confined to Sri Lanka and small areas in south India and southern Burma. After that it spread all over Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and the lowlands of Laos. From the 1930's onward small communities of Theravadins began to emerge in Vietnam, Indonesia, the Malay Peninsular, Nepal and, after 1956, in India also. Theravada was the most well known form of Buddhism in the West until the 1970's when Tibetan Buddhism quickly began to superseded it. In the West today it comes a distant third after Tibetan Buddhism and Zen. It is, as Bhikkhu Bodhi says; 'a still backwater on the otherwise lively Western Buddhist frontier.'

## Monks and Lay People

At an early period Theravada excluded the lay community from the possibility of attaining Nirvana, if not officially then actually. As its name implies, Theravada pertains primarily to elder monks, not to lay men and certainly not to nuns or lay woman. By the time of the *Milindapanha* (1st cent C.E ?) it had become orthodox doctrine that in the rare event a lay man attains enlightenment he would have to become a monk the same day or die. Thanissaro seems to imply that it is impossible for a lay person to become enlightened also. He says; '(We) should note at the inset that Dhamma and Vinaya function together. Neither without the other can attain the desired goal. In theory they may be separate, but in the person who practices them they merge as qualities developed in the mind and character...' The Vinaya is an essential factor for awakening, lay people do not practice Vinaya and therefore they can not become enlightened. This does not correspond very well with what the Buddha taught but of course the Buddha was not a Theravadin. The suttas mention lay people who became awakened. Further, we are told that for the first twenty years of the Buddha's ministry there was no Vinaya. If what Thanissaro says is true, one may well ask how all those who became enlightened during that period manage to do so? And what of the great Tibetan, Ch'an and Zen masters who did not practice the Vinaya or at least not the Theravadin Vinaya? According to Thanissaro's criteria they too should be excluded from the possibility of awakening. What also are we to make of Bhaddali's interesting observation that when there was less Vinaya there were more arahats (M.I,444)?

The Buddha directed much although by no means all of his teachings to renunciants. Many of the things he taught would be relevant to any spiritually inclined person, while a significant body of his teachings is of particular interest to the laity. But from an early period Theravadin monks came to monopolize teaching and decided what was taught and to whom. The situation was different in Mahayana where lay people were always given some place. In the 7th century when the Chinese monk Hiuen Tsiang was in India he spent several years studying philosophy and meditation with the lay teacher Jayasena, one of the most revered teachers of the time. Some of the great Ch'an and Tibetan teachers were lay people. I know of no cases of eminent Theravadin lay Dhamma teachers or meditation masters until the end of the 19th century. With monks monopolizing the Dhamma it is only natural that they emphasized those aspects of it that were of interest to them. Further, they tended to highlight teachings that were convenient to them vis-à-vis the lay community. Thus today it is quite normal to hear people say that a lay person's duty is to look after the monks whose duty it is to study and practice the Dhamma, that you can't understand the Dhamma unless you know Pali, that it is bad karma to criticize or contradict a monk etc. There are certainly lay people who do not accept these assumptions and progressive monks who try to correct them but they are up against the entrenched tradition of centuries.

* Gurulagomin, the great 12th century scholar, may have been a layman although this is not certain. Either way, there is no evidence that he was a teacher in the sense I am referring to. The *Vinayavinicchaya* mentions a person called Upasaka Dhammakitti Pandita who was obviously a learned lay man but we know nothing else about him.

So it has come to be that Theravadians are actually divided into two distinct groups - part-time Buddhists who practice basic Dhamma as and when they can ( lay people) and the 'real' Buddhists who practice Dhamma fully (monks). Lawrence Mills, himself a Theravadin monk for more than thirty years before disrobing and taking a Tibetan teacher, describes Theravada as being 'two-tiered.' He writes; 'In this model, the monastics are superior, while the laity regard themselves as inferior to the monks, a situation often to the detriment of both. The monks can become too proud of their exalted state, while the laity feel not only second-class but also unable to practice very much.' The laity are constantly told that it is sufficient for them to aspire only to practice the most basic Dhamma. But even then, of the three constituents of basic Dhamma - dana, sila and bhavana - most stress is put on the first. I have never actually heard Theravadin monks say that giving to the Sangha is more important than morality, kindness, honesty or meditation but the enormous emphasis placed on it certainly gives people that impression. Stanley Tambiah conducted a survey amongst ordinary Thais where he listed various religious practices and asked people to rank them according to how much merit each would earn. Practicing the Precepts strictly was ranked bottom, far below building temples and giving to monks. This helps to explain why gangsters, crooked businessmen and corrupt politicians in Theravadin lands are amongst the more generous and visible supporters of the Sangha. It is assumed that generosity to the Sangha is sufficient to qualify being a good lay Buddhist just as it is assumed that any evil one might commit can be easily cancelled out by doing the greatest good - giving to the Sangha. Such types can also be quite confident that their donations will be graciously accepted and that the sermons they hear afterwards will make reference to moral behavior only in the most abstract terms.

The main thing connecting Theravadin monks to the lay community is not a common commitment to the Dhamma but the lavish material support and adulation that the latter give to the former and the merit that the former are supposedly able to impart to the latter. Monks are reluctant to relinquish or even share with the laity the role of teacher and the laity for their part are convinced that the Dhamma is too esoteric to know and too difficult to practice beyond dana and perhaps basic sila. Due to the influence of Protestantism in the late 19th century, Sri Lanka has a small but well-regarded number of lay teachers but such people are almost non-existent in others Theravadin cultures. In the Tipitaka monks are depicted in the role of teacher but we also read of monks and lay people learning together and even of monks being instructed by lay people. In India, this tradition of learned lay people persisted for several centuries. Some of the inscriptions of Sanchi and Bharhut dating from the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE refer to lay men and even women who 'know a sutta by heart,' or were 'well versed in the five Nikayas,' or even 'knowledgeable in a Pitaka.' Even in the Vinaya we occasionally read of monks learning Dhamma from lay people (Vin.I,139).

Many Christians will have a Bible and the more devote will read it regularly. All Jewish boys will be tutored in the Torah in preparation for their Bah Mitzvah. Muslims will read the Koran and even be able to recite parts by heart. The vast majority of Theravadin lay people and a good number of monks too, have never read the Tipitaka. When Mahayana Buddhism came to China and Tibet the monks diligently translated all the sutras into the common tongue, a task that continued for several centuries and one which stands as perhaps the greatest translation undertaking in history. Nothing comparable to this ever happened in Theravadin countries. The *Mahavamsa* mentions that one ancient Sri Lankan king had the Tipitaka translated into Sinhala but this is one of the few reference I know in Theravadin history of this being done until modern times. It is unlikely that this translation was widely available. In most countries it is fairly easy to get copies of the *Dhammapada* and little booklets containing perhaps the Mangala Sutta and the Metta Sutta but until recently anything more than this was rare. Finally, in the 1950's the Sri Lankan and Burmese governments undertook to translate the Tipitaka into their respective vernaculars. In the case of the

Sinhala Tipitaka, nearly fifty years later and the job is still not finished. The parts published earlier are hard to find now, individual volumes are large and expensive and the Sinhala used is often so archaic that the average person has trouble reading it. Sri Lankan monks have told me that it is actually easier for them to read the Pali than the Sinhala. It is the same with the Thai and the Burmese translations of the Tipitaka.

Go to any monastery from to Rangoon to Phnom Penh, from Korat to Kandy and if there is a copy of the Tipitaka at all it will be sitting in quiet neglect in its locked and dusty cabinet. But it doesn't really matter because lay people don't want to read the Tipitaka anyway. They have been so conditioned into believing that to be good Buddhists all they have to do is look after the monks that they have little interest in knowing the Dhamma at a deeper level. That's the monk's job. And it is hard not to get the impression that many monks are quite content that this situation should continue. If lay people read what the Buddha said of monks who purvey magic charms and quack medicines they might be very shocked (D.I,9). If they read about lay man like Citta instructing the monks in Dhamma they might start to get big ideas (S.IV,284). If they knew how simply the Buddha and his disciples lived they might start to think all the glitter and surfeit of the monasteries was inappropriate (A.I136). All the distortions and absurdities that make Theravada what it is are able to persist to a very large degree because the majority of people know only what the monks choose to tell them.

A man I know attended a Thai temple in Singapore for fifteen years before becoming one of my students. He could chant the five Precepts but couldn't name any of them and didn't know that what he was chanting referred to morality. He did know however, that every time he went to the temple that he should give an *hung pow* (monetary donation) to the monks. Young well-educated Asians have often told me that they got their first real understanding of Dhamma when they joined a Buddhist group at the university where they were studying in the West. It was probably to try to prevent these very types of problems that the Buddha encourages all his disciples, monastic and lay, men and women, to be well-versed in the Dhamma. In the Mahaparinibbana Sutta he says; 'I will not attain final Nirvana till I have monks and nuns, lay men and lay woman who are accomplished and trained, skilled and learned, knowers of the Dhamma, trained in conformity with the Dhamma, fully trained, living according to Dhamma, who can share the Dhamma with others, teach it, proclaim it, expound it, establish it, elucidate it, analyze it and make it clear; till they shall be able by using the Dhamma to refute false teachings that have arisen and establish the authentic Dhamma' (D.II,104).

## The Vinaya

The Vinaya is the second book in the Pali Tipitaka and contains the two hundred and twenty seven rules monks are supposed to follow and the procedures for the ordering of monastic communities. A separate section contains the rules for nuns. Westerners, indeed many lay Asian Theravadins as well, believe that monks follow all these rules. This is not so, it never has been and it is only sensible that it be that way. Many rules are irrelevant or meaningless outside the ancient Indian context in which they were drawn up. What actually happens is that the majority of monks follow the rules that have traditionally been followed and ignore rules that have not traditionally been followed. It is difficult to detect any pattern in the selection of each other than that rules giving monks precedence and status are always practiced and insisted upon with the greatest conviction. Some quite useful rules are ignored completely while other seemingly useless ones are followed scrupulously. Again, certain rules are carefully observed but in the most inane way or in the letter only. Yet again, others are observed in a way that seems to defy any logic or purpose at all. For example, the overwhelming majority of monks 'handle money,' to use the curious Theravadin phrase. They buy, they sell, they have bank accounts, they accept donations, sometimes they even demand them and this is looked upon as perfectly normal although it is against the Vinaya. Some more finicky monks might insist that any cash given to them be put in an envelope so that they

don't actually have physical contact with it, thus conforming to the letter of the rule while ignoring its intent. Monks will not drink milk after midday , which accords with the Vinaya, but in Thailand they will eat cheese and chocolate in the afternoon which clearly does not. The Vinaya says that any food given to a monk must be formally offered, but if a lay person forgets to do this the monk will instruct him to do so, which infringes the Vinaya rule about asking for anything. In the better monasteries a ceremony is held twice a month during which monks are supposed to confess any infringements of the rules or inappropriate behavior. This ceremony could have great value for personal development and communal living. However, it is nearly always done in a purely perfunctory manner where the words of the ceremony are simply recited with no real confession or forgiveness taking place.

On top of all this there are a number of customary practices which are not in the Vinaya but are treated as if they were, sometimes treated as even more sacrosanct. Thus Thai monks accept gifts of money despite this being against the Vinaya, but they will never take anything directly from a woman's hand, which is not stipulated by the Vinaya. When a monk does the first no one thinks anything of it, but if he fails to do the second he would be looked upon with extreme disapproval, perhaps even disrobed. There is one other complication as well. Which rules are traditionally followed and which are not and the customary practices that have developed around them differ from country to country, from sect to sect, sometimes even from one region to another within the same country. Thai monks, for example, are critical of their Burmese counterparts for going out with only one shoulder covered with the robe. Sri Lankan monks use aluminum alms bowls but for some unaccountable reason Thai monks consider this to be against the Vinaya. No Sri Lankan monk would dare to smoke in public because this is believed to infringe the Vinaya but it is quite acceptable for them to chew tobacco. Thailand's Thammayut sect likewise considers smoking to be contrary to Vinaya but the Mahaniky sect does not.

The reality is that the Sangha has been running on automatic for centuries and the major factor governing most monks' behavior is not Vinaya or Dhamma but long established traditions. Some of these traditions originate with the Vinaya and accord with it, some do not. Some are practical and sensible, many are pointless. Some could be useful if practiced with wisdom, a few are downright bad. The majority of monks conform to traditional patterns of behavior, at least while lay people are watching, and live their lives giving little or no thought to the Dhamma or the Vinaya. A much smaller number of sincere monks, understandably reacting against the slovenliness of the majority, try to follow every rule with almost fanatical exactness. This however, not only shows a serious misunderstanding of the Dhamma, it also inevitably leads to the absurdities and problems that will be mentioned below. An even smaller number of equally sincere but perhaps more intelligent monks are capable of seeing the overall intent of the monastic life - mindful, disciplined behavior conducive to understanding – and try their best to be like that without necessarily following every rule literally. Unfortunately, such monks are a tiny cohort who get no support from the unthinking tradition-bound majority and receive only sneering disapproval from the inflexible fundamentalists minority.

## Becoming a Monk

At the time of the Buddha people became monks or nuns for 'the overcoming of suffering, for the attaining of Nirvana.' As strange as it may seem this is probably the least common reason for entering the Theravadin Sangha. In Burma and Thailand all males are expected to ordain at least once in their life. This experience could have a positive influence on a person but in most cases it seems to leave little impression. Once I stayed in a large and well-run monastery in Mandalay. Being the only Westerner there I was often surrounded by smiling friendly monks curious to see me and to practice their English on me. In a nearby room stayed a much older monk and I noticed that every time he came to join the little group around me the others became quiet, appeared to be a little nervous and one by one drifted off leaving just the two of us together. This older monk spoke

excellent English and it appeared from my conversations with him that he had a good grasp of Dhamma and an interest in meditation. At first I thought the discomfort of the others in his presence was just deference to his age or perhaps his position in the hierarchy. Soon I found out the real reason. He was chief of the local dreaded secret police and had a well-earned reputation for brutality. Once a year he would spend a few weeks as a monk ‘practicing Buddhism.’ Thais believe that ordaining is a way to repay your parents for the sacrifices they made in bringing you up and is the main motivation for becoming a monk in that country. As a rite of passage this is an endearing and socially important one, but as a reason for joining the Sangha it is not very good at all and it does not guarantee that one will become a genuine monk. In Burma all males become monks for a while because…well, simply because it is the tradition. In both countries the majority disrobe after a few days or weeks but others decide to stay. They do this for a variety of reasons. Some develop a genuine interest in the Dhamma, some find the sedate life of the monastery a welcome escape from work and social obligations, some don’t have what it takes to make it in the world and have no choice but to stay. A few remain for the most nefarious reasons which I will not go into here. This means that a given percentage, usually quite a high percentage, of monks have little or no real interest in the spiritual life. In a rare acknowledgment of the true situation, the Thai modernist Chatsumarn Kabilsingh says that many monks in her country are just ‘simple uneducated farmers in yellow robes.’

In Sri Lanka the situation is different. The tradition of temporary ordination does not exist there and once in the Sangha one is expected to stay. Most monks are ordained when they are very young and often because their parents are too poor to look after them. Sometimes a boy with an inauspicious astrological sign is put in the Sangha in the hope that it might change his destiny. Monasteries with valuable estates attached to them are commonly controlled by certain families for generations and one of their members will be ordained to ensure that the land stays in the family. But whatever the reason for ordaining, with good tutorage and inspiring example from his elders, a boy might go on to become genuinely religious. If such influences are absent, if he doesn’t like the monastic life or if he is not psychologically suited for it, he has no choice but to stay. Recently the social pressure to remain in the Sangha had begun to break down and now large numbers of young monks are disrobing. More and more of them are studying secular subjects so they can escape and get a job as soon as they graduate. This means that the monasteries are gradually being left to the very young, the very old, the idle and those who stay only because they have no other way to make a living. The system in Sri Lanka was never particularly good at bringing out the best in a person but now it is even worse than ever.

Just as who ordains is largely unrelated to an interest in the Dhamma, so too is the number of monks ordained. In Burma during the 17$^{th}$ century so many men were entering the Sangha that it was causing a serious manpower shortage in the country. King Thalun made all monks undergo an examination in basic Buddhism knowing that most would fail and thereby giving him an excuse to have them disrobed. According to Thailand’s Dept. of Religious Affairs in 1990 there were 290,300 males in robes in the country and during the monsoon, the time when men traditionally enter monasteries, the number increased to 423,400. People like lots of monks so they can make merit from them, have someone to do blessing ceremonies and funerals for them and just to make sure the local monastery is full. Whether or not they are genuinely committed to the spiritual life seems to be only a secondary consideration, if that. In Sri Lanka, sometimes the reasons for the numbers of boys ordained are very difficult to fathom indeed. Recently I went to a ceremony where thirty seven boys aged between eight and twelve were ordained. It was heart breaking to see the little ones crying for their mothers. When I asked the presiding monk why that number he smiled and said; ‘Because there are thirty seven Factors of Enlightenment.’ Not surprisingly, monasteries are full of monks who are there for reasons entirely unconnected to the true purpose of the Sangha. These monks being the majority, they tend to set the tone of the monastic life and the atmosphere of the monastery. Dhamma-inspired monks find either little support for their aspirations, get pulled down to the level of the majority or increasingly nowadays, just disrobe.

According to the Vinaya a boy as young as eight can become a novice monk. To become a fully ordained monk one need only affirmatively and truthfully answer twelve questions and give one's name and the name of one's teacher.* In the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE when the Vinaya was compiled these requirements were probably already insufficient to determine whether or not a candidate was suitable. Today they are woefully inadequate and are amongst the main reasons for the low level of spirituality in the Sangha. But in keeping with Theravada's seeming inability to change, these same requirements are still all that is needed to become a monk. Virtually anyone can ordain and for almost any reason and indeed they do. The problem has been recognized for well over a thousand years. In the 10th century King Kassapa V of Sri Lanka instructed the Sangha to stop ordaining small boys. Two hundred years later King Nissankamalla pleaded with the Sangha to be a bit more discriminating in who it recruited as many 'deceitful, crafty and evil men' were becoming monks.

* Do you have leprosy? Do you have boils? Do you have ring worm? Do you have tuberculosis? Do you have epilepsy? Are you a human being? Are you a male? Are you free from debt? Are you free from obligations to the government? Do you have your parent's permission? Are you twenty years old? Do you have your robe and bowl?

Despite such exhortations the Sangha continues to lumber on regardless. In India today all sorts of disreputable types turn up at the few Thai and Burmese temples in the country and are given ordination as long as they go somewhere else afterwards. They amble off, without training, knowing nothing about the Dhamma, using their robes to make a living and usually giving Buddhism a bad reputation in the process. In 1975 the exiled former military dictator of Thailand Thanom Kittikchorn became a monk in Singapore and slipped back into his country. Being a monk gave him a *de facto* immunity from the many criminal charges against him. He plotted his return to power, disrobed and then staged a coup. In the early 1990's a Thai monk raped and murdered a British tourist and then threw her body in a cave. After his arrest it was discovered that he was a heroine addict with a long criminal record and had just got out of jail a few weeks previously. Despite this he had no difficulty getting ordained. After this incident there were calls in the press for the system of ordination to be reformed but as usual Thailand's atrophied ecclesiastical council did nothing.* When I first arrived in Singapore I briefly got to know a loud but rather cheerful Thai monk and in the course of conversation asked him why he had joined the Sangha. He told me he and a friend had put all their money in a nightclub in Bangkok and shortly after its opening the river flooded. There was six inches of water on the floor for several weeks and his investment, although unfortunately not the water, all went down the drain. He had ordained, he said, to try to get enough money to start up another nightclub. Each month he would come down to Singapore with a large suit case full of magic charms and lucky idols to sell to Chinese Singaporeans who have an insatiable appetite for such things. The interesting thing about this monk was that he was quite open about his reason for ordaining. He talked about it as if it was the most normal thing in the world, as indeed it is for a good number of Thai monks.

* For a overview of the crisis in Thai Buddhism and the monks and lay people who are attempting to reform it, see Santiduda Ekachai's *Keeping the Faith – Thai Buddhism at the Crossroads*, 2001.

Occasionally the practice of ordaining just anyone can be beneficial, although more from good luck than good management. I once knew a particularly pleasant Thai monk. His left eye was badly injured and one day I asked him about this and he told me his story. He had been a member of a gang of bandits and once when firing a shotgun it had exploded in his face nearly blinding him. Eventually the police came to his home and told his parents that they were sick of arresting him and that next time they caught him they would just shoot him. Out of fear and so he could lie low until the heat was off he fled to a monastery and became a monk. In Thailand criminals sometimes find the yellow robe a convenient temporary refuge from the police. In my friend's case his abbot happened to be a skillful and compassionate man and put him in charge of the little monks. He

enjoyed being a big brother to these youngsters and this brought out his better nature. In time he grew to appreciate the monastic life and with encouragement from the abbot began to study Dhamma, got interested in meditation and twenty years later was still a monk and a good one too.

More commonly though the various misfits who end up in the Sangha usually stay that way. A more discriminating abbot will check a candidate's background and perhaps ask him to wait for a while so he can observe him to see if he will make suitable monk. The Vinaya stipulates that this be done but this is another example of a good rule that is traditionally ignored. Anyone over twenty wanting to become a monk is usually given their novice ordination and then their full ordination immediately afterwards. As with so much else in Theravada, emphasis is on getting the procedure right, not the purpose behind the procedure. As with the locals, a Westerner can turn up at a Theravadin monastery in Asia and be ordained almost immediately. In keeping with the Vinaya, he will be asked whether he is a human, whether he is a male etc. But he will not be asked what most intelligent people would consider were more pertinent questions like; 'Do you have a criminal record?' 'Have you suffered from mental illness?' 'Can you read and write?' 'Is this really what you want to do?' Astonishingly, he won't even be asked if he is a Buddhist! Where else in the world would it be possible to become a clergyman in a religion before knowing anything about that religion?

The original purpose of the Sangha was to provide the optimal environment for attaining Nirvana and to have a body of people capable of disseminating the Dhamma. In Theravada at least, it has long ceased to be of much value for these noble ends. In Sri Lanka it is widely believed that it is not possible to become enlightened anymore and it's not just simple folk who believe this either. I once attended a talk by the famous Narada Thera of Vajirarama in Colombo during which he said that it is even impossible to become a sotapanna today. Richard Gombrich found this same idea to be widely held in Sri Lanka. 'The comparative rarity of meditation is closely connected with the widespread belief in the decline of Buddhism. A village girl said that in a Buddha-less period one must keep trying, but only limited progress is possible. It is further believed by the majority of monks, at least those whose general attitudes can be described as traditional, that the sasana has already declined so far that it is no longer possible for men to attain nirvana. This opinion is very prevalent among the laity…One monk even specified that till (Metteyya) comes it is not even possible to become a sotapanna. The last arahat is commonly said to have been Maliyadeva (1st cent B.C.E). Others say that there *may* still be human arahats, but it is unlikely and/or undiscoverable. One monk compared the sasana to a worn-out organism; very few can attain nirvana now just as a tree grows barren when its fruit is picked too often, and the seventh child is weaker than the first. The average view, perhaps, was that of the monk who said that it was not impossible to attain nirvana now, but as 'religious practice' is weak, it is hard to believe that there is anyone alive who has become an arahat'(italics in original). *

* These same beliefs are common in Thailand, see Jane Bunnag's, *Buddhist Monks Buddhist Laymen*, 1973, 19, ff.

I have heard these same views expressed a thousand times in Sri Lanka. Even Buddhaghosa did not really believe that Theravada practice could lead to Nirvana. His *Visuddhimagga* is supposed to be a detailed, step by step guide to enlightenment. And yet in the postscript he says he hopes that the merit he has earned by writing the *Visuddhimagga* will allow him to be reborn in heaven, abide there until Metteyya appears, hear his teaching and then attain enlightenment. Thus we have the extraordinary and I believe unprecedented situation where the majority of people adhering to a religion, including many of its clergy, freely admit that their religion cannot lead to its intended goal. Is it surprising that so many monks seem to be lacking in conviction? The only way one could possibly explain such a self-defeating belief is by saying that there must have been very good reasons for it developing in the first place.

The situation differs somewhat in Thailand and Cambodia but there the popular conception of what

constitutes enlightenment is a very particular one. Any scruffy old *laung po* credited with predicting a winning lottery number or performing a miracle is hailed as an arahat. Of course more perceptive observers have a very different assessment of the general level of spirituality in the Thai Sangha. According to Paul Breiter Ajahn Chah used to say, 'Buddhism in Thailand is like a big old tree, it looks majestic but it can only give small sour fruit.' Combine notions like these with the Sangha's dysfunctional, outmoded and even counter-productive practices and structure and it is not surprising that it produces so few great masters. One encounters good scholars in the Sangha, sincere practitioners and just simple decent human beings but of inspiring individuals, let alone arahats or even sotapannas, there are precious few.

### The Buddha and the Rules

Even Thanissaro acknowledges that the Vinaya as we have it today was not taught by the Buddha. He says; 'Historians estimate that the Vibhanga and Khandhakas reached their present form no later than the 2nd century BCE, and that the Parivara, or Addenda - a summary and study guide - was added a few centuries later...' In saying this Thanissaro is only accepting what scholars have known for decades. Summing up these findings Von Hinuber says '…the cultural environment of the first four Nikayas of the Suttapitaka is markedly older than that of the Vinayapitaka.' When the Buddha talks about vinaya, as in the phrase 'dhamma vinaya', he is not referring to the Vinaya Pitaka, any more than when he talks about abhidhamma is he referring to the Abhidhamma Pitaka. The Vinaya in its present form had not come into being during the Buddha's lifetime any more than the Abhidhamma had. For the Buddha vinaya (discipline) meant exactly that, disciplined mindful behavior consistent with the spirit of the Dhamma, not the complex codified set of rules that gradually developed in the generations after his passing. We do not know what the first Patimokkha was but it almost certainly consisted of a collection of verses epitomizing the Buddha's teachings, not a collection of rules (see, D.II,48-9). During the Buddha's time there certainly were rules, most of them probably the same as or similar to those followed by other wandering ascetics. The Vinaya Pitaka shows all the evidence of being a later compilation. Take the rule about staying in the one place for the three months of the monsoon. It is known that wandering ascetics in India had been doing this for centuries before the Buddha. It was not so much a hard and fast rule but a convention, done mainly for convenience. By the time the Vinaya was composed this convention had hardened into a rule, the origins of which was no longer understood. Consequently, what is plainly an unconvincing story is told to explain why this rule was promulgated. Take another example. The Vinaya says that young boys can be ordained as monks. This seems to be very much at odds with what we know about the Buddha. He and his disciples renounced the world because they were deeply committed to freeing themselves from samsara for the benefit of all beings. Fully conscious of what they were doing, they turned their backs on social expectations and norms and wandered off in search of truth. Is it possible for a mere child to and think and feel like this? The ordaining of small boys strongly suggests that at the time this rule was composed joining the Sangha was already routineized and being a monk was, for some people at least, a convention or even a career. In one place in the Vinaya it is claimed that the Buddha allowed two small boys to be ordained simply because they were orphans whose parents had been generous towards the Sangha (Vin.I,78).

In the Vinaya there is a passage which reads; 'At that time Venerable Udayin was living in the forest. His monastery was beautiful, something to see, really lovely. His private room was in the middle surrounded by the main structure and was well appointed with couch and chair, cushion and pillow, properly provided with water for drinking and bathing and with well-kept rooms. Many people came to see his monastery. A brahmin and his wife approached Venerable Udayin and asked if they could see it. "Have a look." he said and taking the key and unlocking the door, he entered…'(Vin.I,118). So apparently at the time this story was recorded someone could be permanently housed in well-built, nicely furnished accommodation all secured with lock and key and still pass as an 'forest monk.' This very clearly reflects a time when the original wandering ascetic lifestyle was, at least for some, a distant memory and a dead letter. Interestingly, Ven.

Udayin's comfortable digs sounds remarkably like what sometimes passes for a 'forest monastery' today in Thailand, even down to being a local tourist attraction.

But even if the Vinaya in its present form was taught by the Buddha, to continue to live in London or Los Angles in the 21 st century CE by rules drawn up in northern India in the 2nd or 1st centuries BCE is neither practical or appropriate. Take Pacittiya 56 which forbids a monk from lighting a fire unless he is sick. The origin story explains the reason of this peculiar rule. Apparently, one winter's night some monks made a fire of an old log. There happened to be a cobra in the log and after a while it sprung out frightening the monks half to death. When the Buddha came to know of this he forbid monks from lighting a fire. Is it sensible for a monk living in Toronto in 2001 not to turn on the central heating (or more likely to use hints and insinuations to get a lay person to turn it on for him) just because some monks in northern India over two thousand years ago were frightened by a snake jumping out of a burning log? A Theravadin would inevitably argue that it is and to have another opinion on this matter would be seen as proof of insincerity and probably of immorality too. When you become a Theravadin monk the first and the most important thing you have to renounce is your reason.

Let us have a look at the Buddha's attitude to rules. In the Mahaparinibbana Sutta he says; 'If you wish, the Sangha may abolish the minor rules after my passing' (D.II,154). This seems reasonable enough. Rules are made according to need and modified as circumstances change. The crux of this quotation would be what constitutes an important rule and what a minor one. To most people the differences between the two would be fairly clear. To abstain from killing someone (Parajika 3) or stealing from them ( Parajika 2 ) would be, I would say, two very important rules. Lying down on a bed with detachable legs (Pacittiya 18) or having a mat made out of black wool ( Nissaggiya Pacittiya 12) would be, I suggest, relatively unimportant, in fact probably irrelevant today. The Vinaya says that during the First Council when the question of changing the minor rules came up for discussion, not one of the five hundred arahats could figure out which were the important rules and which the minor ones and so they decided not to change any of them. This would have to be the archetypal Theravadin story and it says much about the supposed wisdom and insight of arahats. In the Sapurisa Sutta the Buddha says, 'Say a bad person is an expert in vinaya and he thinks, "I'm an expert in vinaya but those others are not," and he exalts himself and disparages others. This is the Dhamma of the bad person. But the good person thinks like this, "It is not through being expert in vinaya that greed, hatred and delusion are destroyed. Even if one is not expert in vinaya one may still practice in full accordance with Dhamma, may practice correctly, may still live by Dhamma and therefore be one worthy of honor and respect." Thus, having made the Way itself the main thing, he neither exalts himself nor disparages others. This is the Dhamma of the good person' (M.III,39). Again, this is exactly what one would expect from the Buddha. While certain rules are of moral consequence and should be adhered to with great care, rules of etiquette and for the smooth function of communities have no moral significance and should be changed according to need. If a monk or nun 'makes the Way itself the main thing' he or she is practicing the Buddha's teachings. Once a certain Vajjian monk came to the Buddha and confessed that he could not follow all the rules. The Buddha replied, 'Then can you train in higher virtue, higher mind and higher understanding ?' 'I can do that,' said the monk. The Buddha then said, 'Then train in these three things. If you can do that then greed, hatred and delusion will be abandoned and you will do nothing unskillful or engage in anything evil' (A.III,85). Here again, the Buddha is saying that if a monk or nun is practicing the Dhamma with sincerity and integrity he or she can develop spiritually whether or not they practice all the Vinaya.

## Justification for Vinaya

Thanissaro and other Theravadin fundamentalists claim that strict Vinaya practice helps promote harmony within the Sangha. There is little historical evidence to justify this claim. Thanissaro's book contains many sentences like, 'At points where the ancient commentaries conflicted with the

Canon...' 'One of the difficulties in trying to collate all the various texts is that there are points on which the Vibhanga is at variance with the wording of the Patimokkha rules, and the commentaries are at variance with the Canon', '(T)here are many areas on which the Vibhanga is unclear and lends itself to a variety of equally valid interpretations', etc. Of course for those who have 'made the Way itself the main thing' differences and contradictions in minor rules would be no problem. But pedantic hairsplitting minds can zoom in on such molehills and turn them into veritable mountains, and this is what Theravadins have usually done. Most of the divisions within the Theravada Sangha have come about due to quarrels over points of Vinaya. These quarrels characteristically involved extraordinarily minor matters, some of them dragged on for decades and they often led to acrimony, hatred and even violence. Thanissaro quite correctly says, 'For some reason, although people tend to be very tolerant of different interpretations of Dhamma, they can be very intolerant of different interpretations of the Vinaya and can get into heated arguments over minor issues...' For some reason! Take what were provisional rules meant to address a specific problem, attribute them to the Enlightened One, turn it into moral absolutes, then claim that scrupulous adherence to them is essential for awakening and it is almost inevitable that people will quarrel over them.

In the 12th century the great Sri Lankan king Parakramabahu I spent years trying to unite his country. When he finally succeeded and made himself king one of his first tasks was to try to unite the Sangha. This proved to be even more difficult than all the campaigns he had fought and in exasperation he said as much. He couldn't even get monks of the various sects to sit down with each other. With a combination of threats, bribes and force he eventually united them but almost as soon as he died they broke up once again into squabbling factions. The Ekamsika Parupanu (One Shoulder Both Shoulders) Dispute in the 18th century over the proper way to wear a robe went for over a hundred years. The Adhikamasa Vadaya Dispute in Sri Lanka in the 19th eventually embroiled the ecclesiastical authorities of both Burma and Thailand and was due to a piece of wood supposedly making a sima invalid. This dispute raged for thirty years and was never really resolved. Another dispute that further rent the Sri Lankan Sangha arose due to disagreements about, amongst other things, the proper way to offer food to monks. In 1941 as a part of a determined effort to unite the Sangha in that country, the Thai government built a monastery where monks of the two sects could live together as 'an example of unity and harmony.' As is the norm, interminable bickering over Vinaya soon scuttled the scheme. The same pattern is repeated again and again in Theravadin history. I have been told that disciples of a certain famous Thai teacher now popular in the West once even refused to participate in a ceremony attended by the king unless they were seated separately from monks who had a slightly different Vinaya practice.

Another justification for Vinaya fundamentalism is, as Thanissaro states, that it can 'foster mindfulness and circumspection in one's actions, qualities that carry over into the training of the mind.' The claim here is that the rules can lead to one becoming more mindful or that they might even be a meditation in themselves. This is quite true but it is also true that one could reverse some rules or have completely different rules and they could be just as conducive to mindfulness. The point is the mindfulness, not the object or behavior one is mindful of. It is equally true that the rules could be practiced in an overly fastidious way where all attention was on outward form rather than inward transformation and in reality this is what more usually happens. Some say that strict Vinaya frees a monk from anxiety and worry thus helping the practice of meditation. According to this view a monk's every action is clearly set out and he knows how to behave in every situation, thus freeing him to concentrate on the more important things. Anyone who has ever spent time with fundamentalist monks will know how untrue this is. I once shared a room with a young Australian monk who was very strict about Vinaya. One day I came back to the room and noticed that he was more morose than usual. 'What's wrong?' I asked. 'I have been impure for a whole year without confessing it' he said. 'Which rule have you broken?' I asked. 'Nissaggiya Pacittiya 18,' he replied, the rule against touching gold or silver, i.e. money. His confession surprised me because I knew that he was extremely strict about this particular rule. 'But I've never seen you break that rule.' I said.

He hung his head and said, 'I've been doing it ever since Iv been a monk.' 'How? When?' I asked. He opened his mouth and pointed to a gold filling on one of his back teeth which he had apparently only just remembered. One rule states that a monk should not use Sangha property without putting a cover on it. This seems like a sensible rule but combine it with that obsessive tendency common to Theravadins and it can become a major problem. I knew a monk, again an Australian, who was constantly agonizing over this rule. He was a very restless sleeper and in the mornings he would inevitably wake up finding that his sheet had come loose during the night and his body was touching the bed, that is, touching Sangha property. Even when he woke up with no part touching the bed he would worry that he *might* have done so during the night. One morning he was so overwrought that he was literally on the verge of committing suicide and had I or another monk not been with him he may well have done so. As a brief aside, I have noticed two other things about Vinaya fundamentalists. The first is that they seem to have a higher rate of disrobing than the more 'lax' monks. Secondly, and this should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with psychology, when they do disrobe they often go wild and not uncommonly even give up Buddhism altogether. It is a case of first one extreme and then the other. The two monks mentioned above both soon disrobed, one turned against Buddhism with a vehemence and the other gradually drifted out of it.

It is not uncommon for strict monks to regularly confess to having broken some of the more obscurely stated rules even when they have not knowingly done so, just to free themselves from the anxiety that they *might* have broken them. It is said that when King Monkut was a monk he ordained and disrobed again nearly thirty times because he wasn't *quite* sure that his ordination ceremony had been conducted correctly and that he was therefore a 'real' monk. Vinaya fundamentalists seem to spend much of their time ruminating on the minutiae of the more obscure rules, nervously watching the clock and discussing which of numerous hypothetical scenarios would or would nor not constitute an infraction of the rules. The conversation can range from such subjects as whether swallowing toothpaste while cleaning one's teeth would be breaking the rule against eating after noon, to discussing how to calculate when to stop eating if one were living above the Arctic Circle where a day can be several weeks long. Then there is the matter of whether putting a handkerchief on a chair and sitting on it would make a monk higher than lay people in the room sitting on the same type of chairs. I know of a monastery in Europe where two jars of honey are kept in the kitchen, one labeled 'Morning Honey' and the other 'Afternoon Honey.' The reason for this curious arrangement is thus. Monks should not eat solid food after noon but they are allowed to have honey (Nissaggiya Pacittiya 23). While a monk is putting honey on his morning toast a tiny crumb of bread might end up in the jar. If while having some honey in the afternoon he were to ingest this crumb he would be breaking a rule. To avoid such an enormity two jars are provided and kept separate. Making such arrangements suggests a level of concern out of all proportion to the rule's importance and the size of the tiny crumb that might be accidentally ingested. Far from putting one at ease fundamentalist Vinaya practice not uncommonly leads to anxiety, worry, guilt and obsessive behavior. Another justification for strict Vinaya is that in disallowing a monk to ask for anything it encourages acceptance and egolessness. Again this could be true but more commonly the opposite seems to happen. Strictly observant monks usually become very adept at getting exactly what they want and having their own way no matter what the rules say. There are many ways to skin a cat – hinting, insinuation, a mournful look, a grimace - and as we will see below, Theravada has evolved a whole culture of getting around the rules.

**Hypocrisy**

One has to spend time in a Theravadin monastery to see the spiritually deadening effects that centuries of Vinaya formalism has had. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the pervasive hypocrisy of monastic life. While insisting that one particular rule be followed with almost fanatical exactness monks will quite casually ignore rules that do not suit them. For example, one of the rules says that 'you should not travel in a vehicle. Whoever should so go commits a Dukkhata offense' (Vin.I,190). This was taken to mean any form of conveyance whether wheeled, carried by human or

drawn by animal and the modern equivalent would be a car, bus, train etc. Yet monks are quite happy to have their supporters to drive them around in cars. The Sangharaja of Thailand and the Maha Nayakas of Sri Lanka have no qualms about traveling in their chauffeur-driven Mercedes. To the best of my knowledge no attempt is made to get around this rule with the usual sophistry and hairsplitting. Like the rule about having only one set of robes, it is simply ignored. Then there is the widespread practice of adhering to the letter of the rules while studiously ignoring their purpose and spirit. I once stayed in a monastery in Sri Lanka where the monks always scrupulously examined the buckets of well water for tiny creatures before tipping them over their heads to bathe ( Pacittiya 20). One day one of the monks found that he had worms. He informed the monastery attendant who had previously been instructed in how to deal with such contingencies. The attendant brought a bottle of worm medicine, soaked the label of it, filled several other small unlabeled medicine bottles with water and then put them together in the wormy monk's room. Several times during the following day the monk selected one or another of these bottles at random and drunk it until he had emptied them all thereby killing the worms without breaking the rules.

But the hypocrisy goes far beyond this. Strict Theravadin monks actually publish books instructing lay people how help them wheedle their way around inconvenient rules. The book *The Bhikkhus' Rules-A Guide for Laypeople* by Ariyesako is a good example of this type of literature. In one place it informs the reader that monks are not allowed to dig the earth or get another person to dig it for them (Pacittiya 10). But if a monk wants a hole dug to plant a tree, for example, what is he to do? He cannot ask anyone to do it for him and they do not know what is required. The solution is to teach lay people what might be called the 'wink wink, nudge nudge' approach to Vinaya. I quote from Ariyesako's book; 'It is...allowable for monks to *hint* to lay people or novices about what needs doing *as long as the words or gestures fall short of a command*. When bhikkhus need paths to be cleared, necessary work done on the ground, firebreaks made, etc., any lay attendant wanting to help should *look out for hints and indications*'. Thanissaro recommends a similar strategy for getting around the rule against damaging plants. You can indicate '*indirectly* that the grass needs cutting (Look how long the grass is) or that a tree needs pruning (This branch is in the way) *without expressly giving the command* to cut. In other words, this is another rule where one may avoid an offence by using kappiya vohara; wording it right' (in both quotations italics mine). If one is going to get around the rules like this then why insist on having them in the first place? Vinaya fundamentalists say that following the rules strictly encourages acceptance and discipline. Stratagems like the ones mentioned above suggest very strongly that it encourages nothing more than a Pharisee-like mentality.

There is nothing new in this sort of thing either, it has a long tradition in Theravada. The ancient commentaries to the Vinaya and traditional Vinaya manuals give numerous similar instructions on how to circumvent the rules. Another way of getting around the rules is by juggling definitions. Thanissaro gives an example of when this can be done. Sekhiya 73 says that a monk should neither defecate or urinate while standing unless he is sick. But what if you are in the West, you have to urinate and the cubical in the public toilet is taken? Thanissaro suggests that you designate yourself as 'sick' so you can go up to the urinal and relive yourself with a clear conscience and without breaking the rule.

Not surprisingly the greatest hypocrisy within the Theravadin Sangha revolves around money. As pointed out before, the overwhelming majority of monks quite openly accepts and uses money and in this sense at least they are being honest and realistic. This is the one rule that nearly all monks are prepared to be flexible about. The majority are therefore only guilty of hypocrisy in that they disregard this rule while still making a big show of other equally obsolete or less important ones. It is however the fundamentalists who pride themselves on being 'pure' and on 'upholding Vinaya' who are the most hypocritical in this respect. There are two ways some of these monks circumvent the rule concerning money. The most common is by instructing devotees to put their donations in an envelope so that in the strictly literal sense the monk does not actually 'touch' it. I once knew a

monk who kept a pair of tweezers so that he could count the donations he received without having physical contact with them. In the main shrine rooms in Theravadin temples throughout southeast Asia there is always a large box with envelopes in it so that people can put money in them before offering it to the monks. The second way and one used by the more sophisticated fundamentalists, is to have what amounts to a personal accountant. I know 'strict' monks who go on speaking tours, do blessing ceremonies or appeal for support for their monasteries, knowing that they will generate money. They benefit from the money thus donated, they have complete control over how it is spent and they peruse the accounts while being careful not to have direct physical contact with a single cent. Such monks remind one of John D. Rockefeller, who, when he became a multimillionaire, never actually carried or used any money.

The one redeeming feature of all this Theravadin hypocrisy surrounding money is that at least it provides opportunities to sometimes have a really good laugh. Once, on arriving in a certain southeast Asian city, I had no choice but to stay in a large, rich and very popular Thai temple. The day after my arrival the abbot told me that I must accompany him and several other monks to a private home for a dana. After we had eaten and were leaving the lady of the house stood at her door with envelopes bowing to each monk as they passed and dropping an envelope into their shoulder bags which they opened for her. I did not have a shoulder bag and so put out my hand to take the envelope. The women hesitated for a moment before giving it to me, unsure that she was 'doing it right.' The abbot spent much of the journey back to the temple scolding me for having taking the envelope directly, which he said, was 'against Wini' (i.e. Vinaya). As soon as we got back to the temple he rummaged through a cupboard until he found an old shoulder bag, threw it to me and said angrily, 'Wini! You must practice Wini!' and then mumbled something in Thai about 'farang' monks. Two nights later I was awoken by a loud noise, I fumbled for the clock to see what the time was and found that it was about 1.30 am. I lay in bed for a while trying to think what the strange noise coming from downstairs could be and finally got up and see what it was. As I turned the corner and began to descend the stairs I was confronted by the most amazing sight I have ever beheld. There on the huge table in the dining room was a pile of coins and bank notes which must have been five or six inches high and which spread from one end of the table to the other, a distance of about twenty five feet. All the monks sat around the table counting the money and putting it in neat piles and the abbot sat at the far end, cigarette in mouth and notebook in hand, adding up the monthly take from all the donation boxes which were lying upturned on the floor. The strange noise I had heard was the metallic click and jingle of thousands of coins being gathered up and counted. I could not help laughing to myself and returned to my room, lay down on my bed and drifted back to sleep while chanting that old Theravadin mantra Wini, Wini, Wini, Wini!

Of course all this dissembling and hypocrisy could be easily avoided. If a monk has genuine commitment and sincerity he should be able to use money where necessary and not be seduced by it, it could touch his hand without touching his heart. Adhering strictly to rules does not thereby change the mind, in fact it is often just a cover for cunning, inflexibility, self-righteousness and other negative states.

## Rituals

One often hears Theravadins say that they don't like Mahayana because it has too much ritual. I would contend that ritual is more integral to Theravada and more prevalent in it than in Mahayana. But before proceeding it will be necessary to define what a ritual is? If an action is preformed for a particular purpose it can be considered necessary and meaningful. If that same action is preformed without regard to whether or not it achieves its original purpose or after the purpose has become redundant, it can be said to be a ritual. Based on this definition the way most Vinaya rules are practiced qualifies them to be called rituals. Take for example the rule which forbids a monk eating anything that has not been formally offered (Pacittiya 40). If I am walking through an orchard and I casually pluck an apple or pick one up from the ground the owner might get annoyed and I might

get into trouble. Further, the orchard owner might also get a poor impression of the Sangha. Looked at thus this rule could be meaningful. But let us say a friend invites me to his home for a meal, I come, we are the only ones in the house, he gets the food ready and when it is he sets it before me saying; 'Hear is your lunch'. When he puts the plate in front of me there can be no doubt in my mind that the food is meant for me and for me alone and I can consider it to have been given to me whether it had actually been put in my hand or not. If I ask that it be 'formally offered' (i.e. taken with two hands and put directly in my hand) or if he insists on 'formally offering' it, this action would cease to be useful or meaningful, it would be superfluous – in short it would have become a mere ritual.

Take another example, the vassa and the kathina. The Sangha started as and remained for some centuries mainly an organization of itinerants. During the monsoon in India when travel was difficult, monks would remain in one place for three months. At the end of this period before they continued wanderings lay people would offer them new robes and other necessities. During this period the kathina and the vassa were meaningful and useful, indeed they were necessary. But today the situation has completely changed. In India and even more so in Sri Lanka and Thailand roads, bridges and transport are as good during the monsoon as they are during the rest of the year. Further, like ordinary people, monks today usually travel from one place to another by car, bus, train, etc. And yet monks still don't travel during the vassa. Nowadays, some Theravadin monks live in areas where the months July to October constitute the dry season. Yet still they observe the vassa. There are two monsoons a year in Sri Lanka and monks 'observe' the second but not the first. Almost no monks today are itinerants, they are often the legal owners of their monasteries and even when not usually have full rights of residence in a particular temple and may spend their whole life there. And yet the kathina is still carried out at the end of the vassa as if monks are only temporary visitors. In other words, observing the vassa and performing the kathina have become just rituals. Now it could be argued and I think quite rightly, that it is both possible and legitimate to give new meanings to old practices. But if one is going to give the kathina or the vassa new meanings (the main function of the kathina today seems to be fundraising) is it necessary to insist that every minute detail of these now obsolete practices be followed? A Theravadin would inevitably argue that it is.

One more example. Pacittiya 10 and 11 say that a monk must not destroy plants or dig the earth. Like some other rules these two originate in the beliefs and practices of pre-Buddhist ascetics, in this case the Jains. The Jains believed that even plants, rocks, water, sand and earth were living entities lower than other creatures but sentient nonetheless. So to pluck a flower or break a clod of earth would be to cause them pain or perhaps even to kill them. Sekhiya 74 and 75 are based on this same misconception. This means that if a monk eats a fruit containing fertile seeds he would be killing. Consequently the Vinaya describes a procedure to avoid committing such an offence. Before a monk is given any seed-bearing fruit a lay person must plunge a knife into the seeds to kill them, thus making the fruit 'acceptable' for the monk. While doing this they should say 'Kappiyam Bhante' meaning 'It is allowable, Venerable Sir.' This practice is done in Thailand and Burma but has completely fallen into abeyance in Sri Lanka. Thanissaro has *five pages* on this rule and the essence of his comments is this. It is not necessary to go through all this rigmarole, firstly because this procedure is based on a primitive and false 'animistic belief' and secondly because it would take too long to kill all the seeds in say, a bunch of grapes or a bowl of oranges. All you have to do is kill the seeds symbolically – running a knife lightly over the skin of one grape or one orange while saying 'Kappiyam Bhante' would make the whole bunch or the whole bowl 'allowable.' In other words, while admitting that this procedure is based on a false belief he insists that one should still do it anyway although it is only necessary to pretend to do it. A senior and very learned Burmese monk has assured me that fruit is allowable whether or not the seeds are killed as long as the phrase 'It is allowable Venerable Sir' is said in Pali; not English or even Burmese. Very clearly this and similar practices are nothing more than meaningless, empty and rather stupid rituals. They have no bearing upon morality, on discipline or on the transformation of the mind, and in the case

just mentioned don't even pretend to fulfill their stated purpose. Indeed it could be argued that to insist on performing this ritual would be example of silabhataparamasa, the second of the Ten Fetters.

The ritualizing tendency of Theravada goes far beyond the practice of Vinaya; indeed it seems to infest nearly every aspect of the tradition from morality to meditation, from dana to devotion. At the time of the Buddha one became a monk by a radical change of attitude leading to the renunciation of the world. In Theravada it is by participating in a ritual and exhibiting certain outward characteristics that one becomes a monk. Candidates to the monkhood usually keep their personal property, allegiances and ties and yet are considered monks so long as they have undergone the correctly preformed ordination ceremony. They are not required to give up anything, indeed they are not even asked to do so, but the greatest care is taken that the ordination ceremony is done properly. In Sri Lanka there is uncertainty about the pronunciation of one Pali letter and so part of the ordination ceremony is repeated twice – once using the one pronunciation and again using the other – because the ceremony is considered invalid if the words are not said properly. A *sil maniyo* or a *maichi* * could have genuinely given up everything and be more disciplined, sincere and virtuous than the monks in the nearby monastery. But she would never be considered a member of the Sangha because she would not have undergone the ordination ceremony and therefore could not legitimately have the outward characteristics of a monastic. According to the *Milindapanha* an immoral monk is superior to an immoral lay man and gifts given to him will still yield great merit. Why is this? Because such a monk has the mark of a monk (shaven head etc) and because when he is in the company of others he acts as if he were virtuous (Mil.257). It couldn't be more clear. A monk is one who has undergone a particular ritual and looks and acts like a monk, no matter what he is like on the inside. If he has genuinely renounced the world and is learned and virtuous so much the better, but the defining factor of his monkhood is having undergone the ritual. It need hardly be mentioned here that the Buddha took the exact opposite view on what made a monk. See for example *Dhammapada* 142, 264, 266, etc.

* Female renunciants in Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Writing of his experiences in Thailand the English monk Phra Peter mentions that most of the food he and other monks are given on begging rounds is thrown away. 'Even after my two boys have eaten all the food they need for the day, there are three or four carrier bags full, plus a considerable quantity of rice. This is all thrown away. Everyday. When that much food is multiplied by the number of monks and novices who go out on binderbhat, it must add up to a great deal of food wasted daily… Besides being a useless waste, the food is frequently offered by poor people and they may give the monks better food than they themselves eat. I thought at first, the people presumably expect the monks to eat it. Or had going on bindabaht become merely a symbolic gesture concerned more with 'making merit' than actually feeding the monks ?' Phra Peter asked the students in the class he was teaching for their opinion on this matter. 'Somewhat to my surprise there was general agreement amongst the students that the monks should accept as much food as the people wanted to offer, even though most of it would be thrown away. The students said that the donors were usually fully aware that the monk couldn't possibly eat all the food but that the point was in the giving, not in the receiving. They agreed that the monk should show Metta and allow the people to 'make merit.'' Thus Phra Peter's suspicions were confirmed, going on alms round, like many Theravadin practices, is primarily a 'symbolic gesture,' a ritual. The opinion of Phra Peter's informants, which most Thais would agree with, illustrates how even practicing metta has become ritualized. One 'shows metta' by taking from people food that you don't need and they can't afford and then throwing it away. To a Theravadin, educating the poor to use their meager resources more intelligently would be considered a secular act that had nothing to do with metta.

For ancient Mahayana monks the alms round wasn't a ritual, it was a way of getting sustenance and yet another opportunity to develop compassion. The Ratnarasi Sutra says a monk going on

pindapata should think like this. ' "Those people are busy, they are not obliged to give me anything. It is a wonder that they notice me at all. How much more that they give alms!" Thus one should go begging without worrying. For all beings that come within his view - men, women, children and even animals - he has love and compassion… Whether the alms he gets are poor or good we must look around all the four quarters and ask; "What poor creature is there in this village, town or city with whom I might share my alms"? If he sees some poor creature, he must give him some of his alms. If he sees no such creatures he must ask; "Are there any poor creatures who I have not seen? For them I will set apart a first share of my alms." ' Even if a Thai or Burmese monk going on pindapata wanted to share the things he was given with a hungry or homeless person he met on his way, he couldn't do so without risking strong disapproval. His donors would be most indignant if they knew that the offerings they gave him were then given to anyone other than another monk or a temple boy. Further, even a very hungry person would be reluctant to accept the monk's offer of food. Theravada teaches that it is extremely bad karma to accept anything from a monk and this is a notion that ordinary people take very seriously indeed. In Sri Lanka I used to have a small hermitage on the side of a steep hill and anyone who walked up to see me would usually arrive hot and sweating. I would always offer them a glass of water but more often than not they would refuse, saying, '*Paw nedha*,' 'It's a sin isn't it?'

**Mole Hills out of Mountains**

Shortly after the riots in Sri Lanka in July 1983 I happened to be staying in a monastery in Bandarawela district whose abbot was well-known for his anti-Tamil sentiments. One morning a group of men sat at his feet excitedly discussing the recent events. The abbot was giving his opinion and I recall one of the things he said was that the Tamils should be driven out and that if they didn't go they should all be killed. As he proceeded he talked in an increasingly loud and violent manner. After about an hour of this a laymen in the front of the audience caught his attention and tapped his watch. The abbot looked up at the clock, saw that it was 11.35 am, drew his tirade to a close and hurried off to have his dana. The audience had clearly agreed with what the abbot had been saying but there certainly would have been mutters of disapproval had he not finished eating before noon. When the notorious monk Buddharakshita was in prison awaiting trial for murdering the then prime minister of Sri Lanka in 1959, the prison routine was changed so that he could have his dana before noon and most people thought this only proper. This 'addiction to trivia,' to use Thomas More's phrase, is pervasive amongst Theravadins and blinds them to what really matters.

To take another more shocking example. It had recently come to public attention that some monks in the poor northeast of Thailand help procure girls for the flesh pots of Bangkok. Agents from the brothels sponsor religious ceremonies in monasteries, the locals flock to them, the recruitment takes place and the abbot gets his cut according to how many girls are ensnared. To ease the girl's guilt and hesitation the monks tell them that becoming a prostitute is due to their past bad kama which they can lessen if they send some of their earnings back to the monastery, which many do.* Apparently this sort of thing has been going on for years and it could only happen because monks and local people don't see it as contrary to the letter of the Vinaya. And indeed the monks who participate in this loathsome business could argue as much. If the money 'donated' to the temple is handed to the steward in the proper way, what rule has been broken? If the Vinaya is in danger of being breached during the negotiations with the brothel agents this can be easily avoided by 'wording it right.' And if the result of all this is exploitation and misery what has that to do with the monks? According to both the Vinaya and Theravadin orthodoxy, monks are meant to work for their own salvation and not get involved in worldly matters. But one thing is certain. If a young monk from one of these procuring monasteries were seen shaking hands with a female tourist, eating a biscuit in the afternoon or kicking a foot ball, there would be an outcry and he would face considerable disapproval. But the fact is that these and other shameful or absurd practices go on and no one, including the ecclesiastical authorities, worry too much about it as long as the outward form of the Vinaya is conformed to. When Shanti Asoka's controversial founder Phra Phutirak advocated

somewhat unconventional Vinaya practices, Thailand's ecclesiastical council very quickly called on the secular arm and had him forcibly disrobed. To the best of my knowledge the procurer monks from the northeast have never been disciplined, although since their exposure by the press they are probable a bit more discreet

* *Bangkok Post*, 11, Feb. 1991.

The truth is that in Theravada following the letter of the Vinaya is more important than teaching the Dhamma, it is more important than inconveniencing others, it is more important than kindness or meditation and it is more important than taking a moral stand. Indeed, Theravada makes it clear that following the Vinaya is more important than life itself. In the commentaries there is the story of a nun who fell into a pond where she was grabbed by a crocodile. A man who saw this ran to help the woman but when he extended his hand so that she could grab hold of it and be pulled to safety she refused to take it because of the rule that says monks or nuns are not allowed to touch someone of the opposite sex. The nun was consequently eaten by the crocodile. In any other tradition such a story would be used to illustrate the second of the Ten Fetters – the ritualizing of morality and rules - but in Theravada this nun is held up as a model of virtue. It is true that in one place Buddhaghosa says that a monk might consider breaking a minor rule for the sake of compassion, one of the few feeble glimmers of light in his otherwise dreary writings. But the problem is this; if the arahats at the First Council couldn't figure out which were the important rules and which the minor ones, how is an ordinary unenlightened monk to know? A much better course is to forget about compassion and follow all the rules unbendingly, or at least their outward form. And this is exactly the course that Buddhaghosa more usually advises. For example, he says that even if one's mother falls into a raging river one must under no circumstances attempt to save her if it means making physical contact. Again, he says that if a monk falls into a pit he must not dig himself out even to save his life as this would be breaking the rule against digging the earth. Now when such petty rules are thought to be more important than the lives of others, more important even than one's own life, is it surprising that they are given so much attention that the things that really matter are considered insignificant by comparison?

Mahayana arose in part as a protest against exactly this type of mean-spirited egoism and pettifogging. The *Bodhicariyavatarapanjika* says that compassion and the welfare of others should always come before adherence to minor rules and sometimes even to major ones. 'Having realized the highest truth, he should be committed to the welfare and happiness of other beings. And if someone should object and say; 'How can he avoid committing an offence while doing something that is forbidden?' the reply is that the Lord taught that what is forbidden may be preformed by one who perceives with the eye of knowledge the benefits of others therein…But this does not apply to everyone; only to those who practice compassion to the highest degree, who is without selfish motive, who is solely concerned with the interest of others and fully dedicated to this ideal. In this way there is no offence for one who is skilled in means and who works for the interest of others with wisdom and compassion.'

## Honor and Worship

The brahmins of ancient India claimed that they were entitled to respect simply because they belonged to a particular social group. The Buddha criticized this idea saying that it was the virtuous and the wise who were really worthy of respect. From this position Theravada has come full circle back to the Brahminical idea. According to the *Milindapanha* even a lay man who has attained the first stage of awakening must stand up and worship a novice who has no attainments (Mil.162). Monks insist that they should be respected and revered simply because they wear a yellow robe and like the brahmins of old they can get very piqued if they do not receive it. It is fascinating to see the lengths Theravadin monks will go to in order to maintain their supposed superiority in the eyes of others. P. A. Bigandet writes of a scene he witnessed in Penang towards the end of the 19$^{th}$ century.

A Thai monk had to visit a man confined in the upper room of a house. To see him the monk would have to enter the ground floor room of the house meaning that for at least a few moments he would be lower than the lay man - anathema for a Theravadin monk. What to do? The monk ordered a ladder to be bought and placed with one end on the ground and the other on the upstairs window and he climbed into the man's room that way. I have not heard of this sort of thing being done nowadays but I do know that Theravadin monks will even publish books instructing people on how to respect them correctly.

Inviting a Theravadin monk to your home or your Buddhist society can be a little like having royalty visit. Before he arrives you might be instructed on how to bow properly, how to address him, to prepare a special high seat for him, to reserve a toilet exclusively for his use, etc. When the monk makes his entrance it will be to hushed voices, bowed heads and women making exaggerated gestures to avoid even accidental physical contact with him. Before his sermon you will have to formally invite him to speak and before he leaves you must formerly request his forgiveness for anything you may have done to upset him. Ariyesako has *fifteen* pages of requirements expected of you if you are visiting a Theravadin monastery in the West. This is a selection of some of them.

'If you meet the monk in the shrine room or inside the house show your respect before you start your discussion. When you leave please do the same'.

'Please do not... shake hands with the monk. When speaking to the monk always be polite and never raise your voice'.

'Do not point your feet or your back to the monk. This is considered disrespectful'.

'Unless you are serving a meal out of a dish, always offer anything with both hands. Do not leave it in front of a monk without offering it'.

'Lay people should not have their meals in front of the monk and they should eat only after the monk has finished his meal'.

'People should not stand and talk to a monk when he is seated'.

'A monk should always be approached respectfully by the person offering dana, who should always try to maintain a bodily posture lower than that of the monk'.

'When walking in the company of monks lay people should walk a little behind, but still within speaking distance'.

This list comes from the chapter in Ariyesako's book called 'Examples of Vinaya Practice' although to the best of my knowledge none of these requirements except perhaps the last pertain to any Vinaya rules. As often happen with Theravadians, Ariyesako is confusing the etiquette of a particular culture (in this case Thai culture) with Vinaya and even with Dhamma. This is just the kind of mistake the more narrow-minded Christian missionaries made in Asia in the 19$^{th}$ century. To be a Christian you had to not only believe in Jesus but also speak English, wear trousers and eat with a knife and fork – in short, become an Englishman. Such an attitude held back the spread of Christianity then just as it is inhibiting the growth of Dhamma now. Needless to say, the Buddha always took a much more intelligent approach. Knowing that Truth transcends culture and being deeply concerned that the Dhamma should be accessible to all he was prepared to adjust himself to the culture and needs of others. 'I remember well many assemblies of patricians, priests, householders, ascetics and gods…that I have attended. Before I sat with them, spoke to them or joined their conversation, I adopted *their* appearance and *their* speech whatever it might be and then I instructed them in Dhamma' (D.II,109). The Buddha told his monks and nuns that when teaching

Dhamma in foreign parts they should adopt the language of the people they were living with (M.III,235). If this is true of language should it not also be true of etiquette and other cultural conventions?

Another point highlighted by the above list is that Theravadin monks are not just very concerned about receiving respect, they require being respected in a way that suits them. In the West we may show our respect for someone by shaking their hand, a traditional gesture with its own grace and dignity. But that is not good enough for a Theravadin monk. He wants you to respect him in the Thai way or the Burmese way even if he and you happen to be Westerners and in the West. Hold out your hand to a Theravadin monk and he will very quickly inform in a rather imperious tone that 'Monks don't shake hands,' despite being no rule to that effect. When meeting the Queen it is considered polite for a male to nod his head in a sort of symbolic bow and a female to give a slight curtsey. Do that to a Theravadin monk and he might pass you a little tract containing detailed instructions and diagrams on how to bow to him 'properly,' by which is meant the way it is done in southeast Asia. Sri Lankan monks and Western monks trained in Sri Lanka tend to be a little less finicky about this sort of thing.

It is interesting to see how all this compares with the Buddha's attitude to honor and worship. After Sonadanda took the Three Refuges he confided to the Buddha that he had a particular problem. He was a brahmin and his income depended on the respect other brahmins held him in. If they saw him bowing to the Buddha he would lose respect and consequently his income would suffer. 'So if on entering the assembly hall I put my palms together in greeting, consider it the same as if I had stood up for you. If on entering the assembly I remove my turban consider it the same as if I had bowed at your feet. If when riding in my chariot I were to get down to salute you others would criticize me. So if I pass you in my chariot and I just lower my head consider it the same as if I had got down and bowed at your feet' (D.I,126). The Buddha had no problems with Sonadanda's way of paying respect presumably because he had sympathy with his predicament and because for him social formalities were of little importance. In another place the Buddha says, 'I have nothing to do with homage and homage has nothing to do with me' (A.III,30). Reading Ariyesako's book and similar publications it would be easy to get the impression that being a Theravadin monk has everything to do with homage. Once Sariputta told the Buddha that he tried to compare himself to a lowly dusting rag or a humble outcaste child (A.IV,375). How different the enlightened Sariputta was from those unenlightened Theravadin monks today who sit on elevated thrones with their self-satisfied smiles and their sense of entitlement as they give orders to the laity and acknowledge the homage they receive from them with only the briefest nod or grunt!

Mahayana sutras often refer to what they call 'all the proud arahats' and centuries later many Theravadin monks still give the impression of being just slightly haughty and conceited. This incident occurred just recently in a small Buddhist group in Europe. A certain visiting monk who shall remain nameless was giving a talk to an audience of about thirty people which included a woman who had a hat on. The monk noticed this and apparently felt that it was a serious enough threat to his dignity to be eluded to in his talk. He deviated from the gist of his sermon and mentioned how important it is to render proper respect to the Sangha and how rude it would be to wear a hat, for example, while a monk was teaching the Dhamma. Everyone in the room turned to the embarrassed woman and a few minuets later she crept quietly from the room and burst into tears. It later emerged that this woman had terminal cancer and had lost all her hair while undergoing chemotherapy. She wore a hat to hide her disfigurement. In Sri Lanka I once attended a talk by a well-known meditation teacher. When he entered the hall several people failed to stand up. Visibly annoyed at not getting the respect he believed was his due, he walked to the front of the hall, harangued the organizers of the talk and the audience and then stormed out. I have witnessed similar performances on several other occasions.

There are stories in the commentaries which show that even Theravadin arahats can get in a huff

when they are not suitably honored. The arahat Dhammadinna for example, was invited to a particular monastery to teach meditation but the inmates were performing their daily duties when he arrived and failed to greet him properly. After stamping his foot with disapproval he rose into the air and left. This story is not meant to be disapproving of Dhammadinna, far from it, it is told to illustrate the idea that being a stickler for formalities is an indication of the highest spiritual attainments. Once I listened as Ven. K. Sri Dhammananda reminisced about his youth in India when he was studying at Banares Hindu University. He talked with affection and admiration about the then vice chancellor Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the great philosopher who later went on to become president of India. He was silent for a while and then said, 'There is one thing about those days I regret. When I and the other monks used to go for an early morning walk we would often pass Dr. Radhakrishnan out on his morning walk. He always put his hands together and greeted us but being monks we never greeted him back. Nowadays I really regret doing that.' Most Theravadin monks still act as Ven. Dhammananda did then, the only difference being that they are unlikely to ever develop the wisdom and humility to regret their behavior. If genuine and 'strict' monks are so concerned about honor and respect what are the far more common run-of-the-mill monks like? Spiro recounts an incident he witnessed during his stay in Burma. 'When a Mandalay bus driver allegedly insulted some monks who were riding in his bus, a large meeting of monks demanded that the driver walk from the Government Building to the Arakan Pagoda - a distance of approximately five miles - with a sign identifying his 'crime' hanging from his neck, and that a group of monks ride behind him announcing that this is the price to be paid for insulting a monk. After many negotiations with the management of the bus company, the monks relented, settling for a public request for forgiveness by the bus driver, and of course a special feast.'

In the *Tathagataguhya Sutra* and many other Mahayana works it says that a bodhisattva will 'bow before all beings.' A Theravadin monk would never even consider doing such a thing. Why are monks so touchy or demanding when it comes to social formalities that elevate them in the eyes of others? Why won't they return a greeting or a salutation even from a Mahayana monk, let alone a lay person? Why do they never say 'Thank You' when given something or helped in some way? Nowhere does the Buddha say a monk must not do any of these things nor is there any Vinaya rule to that effect, so fidelity to the scriptures can't be the reason. The fact is that Theravada is constructed in such a way as to make it more likely that a monk will develop a superiority complex. The very languages of Theravadin cultures reinforce the monks' sense of self-importance. In Burma monks are referred to as *yahan* which is derived from the Pali word arahat and they are addressed as *pungi* meaning 'great glory.' The Thai honorific *phra* is only used for the Buddha, the king, the gods and predictably, the monks. In Sinhala monks refer to themselves as *muradevatavo*, 'protective gods' and are addressed as *swamiwahanse* which means something like 'Your Lordship.' When talking to or speaking of monks, Theravadin lay people use what amounts to a special separate vocabulary. Sri Lankan lay people *nidienawa,* 'sleep' while monks *satapenawa,* 'gracefully repose.' Ordinary Burmese *tamin sarde* 'eat', while monks *sun poung pide '* 'glorify the food.' Most telling of all, ordinary Burmese *theide* 'die' while monks *pyando mude* 'return to heaven.' Monks in Sri Lanka even lose their temper in a different way; they *ediriwenawa* while lay people merely *tarahawenawa*.

Monks are treated as if they were superior and of course hopefully they should be. But the reality is that short of being sotapannas or something higher, monks will be ordinary human beings with the usual weaknesses and frailties of other ordinary human beings. Of all the defilement pride is the most easy to arouse and by far the most seductive. Treat an ordinary person, even a very sincere and mindful one, as if he were God Almighty and it is only natural that in time he will start to think and act as if he were. Adulation, deference and praise can be very seductive. First monks like it, then they expect it, in time they depend upon it and eventually, to guarantee that it is always forthcoming, they make it a theme of their sermons and writings. A monk may fail to teach many aspects of Dhamma but the importance of serving and honoring the Sangha is a subject that is never neglected. The Buddha said that those who practice the Dhamma best honor him best (D.II,138).

Many Theravadin monks appear to teach the reverse of this, that those who honor them best practice the Dhamma best.

The usual justification monks give for bowing to them, eating separately from them and never sitting higher than them is that it is a way for you to confront and weaken your pride. Isn't it heartening to know how concerned Theravadin monks are about helping lesser mortals get rid of their pride? How thoughtful they are in making themselves available for this worthy end! But if bowing to others can lessen pride does it not follow that being bowed to can give rise to pride? This point never seems to be discussed. The monks' insistence of the importance of respecting them and the fact that it is usually the first thing a newcomer to Theravada is taught, suggest that its real purpose is something else. The meditation teacher Eric Harrison writes; 'A bow is a little thing, but what does it mean? It is almost impossible to approach a Buddhist teacher as an intellectual equal. The teaching dynamic can't happen until you acknowledge his superior status. That authority needs to be constantly reinforced by deferential behavior… The ritual behavior around a teacher is designed to enhance his status and that of the teaching. Deference, or a willingness to enter into the pecking order, is usually a requirement for being taught at all.' It is hard to disagree with this assessment.

But the excessive reverence surrounding monks does not just tend to make many of them complacent and proud, it also has a more insidious effect. It helps create an atmosphere in which lay people can end up attributing to monks virtues they do not have and being unable to see vices they may have. It almost seems that lay people go temporarily blind when they see a yellow robe. In the *Dhammapradipika* there is a story that suggests the ideal lay Theravadins' response towards failings within the Sangha. A man once saw a monk and a nun having sex together but rather than remonstrate with them he blamed his own eyes and then blinded himself so that he would never again see evil in the Sangha. The intellectual equivalent of this sort of thing is the norm and in time even a good monk can be tempted to take advantage of it in ways that imperceptibly lead to him becoming dishonest and exploitative. I think this goes a long way to explaining not just why there is corruption in the Theravadin Sangha but why the corruption is so pervasive. And incidentally, it is not just those with traditional Theravadin conditioning who are gullible when it comes to the Sangha; idealistic and uninformed Western Buddhists can be just the same.

Years ago I was asked to conduct a meditation course at a particular center in the West. When I arrived I was told that another monk was also using the premises to give a course and I was taken to meet him. He was an elderly Burmese monk of decidedly shabby appearance. He welcomed me in a hearty manner, slapping me on the back and talking at the top of his voice. He smoked one of those stinking Burmese cigars and his teeth and fingers were stained brown with nicotine. As it happened I already knew about this monk. He had quite a reputation in southeast Asia for hawking fake relics and for his shady business dealings. This was no surprise to me – such monks are common enough and I have encountered them many times before. What did astound me though was the ease with which he was able to pass himself off as a meditation master and the apparent awe that his Western students held him in. They drunk in his every word as if he were an arahat or at least nearly enlightened. Bad people usually have to disguise their true character and intentions from those they wish to deceive, but for the shady Theravadin monk this is usually not necessary. Just to wear the yellow robe is all that is needed to put peoples' critical faculties to sleep. The woman who had originally invited this monk to the West later distanced herself from him after he had made a pass at her but by then it didn't matter. She of course would never say anything and he had already attracted numerous others who were only too happy to adore him, raise money for him and do his bidding.

It would be easy to be critical of monks like this and see them as undermining Theravada. My feeling is that it is actually the other way around. They are as much victims as the devotees they exploit. They corrupt Theravada but only because Theravada has corrupted them. There can be no

doubt that enough males enter the monastic life with good intentions and that even the youngsters who are dragooned into the Sangha could, with the right influence, develop into genuine monks. But slowly and inexorably even good monks have their egos inflated by constant adulation. They are lulled into indolence by swarms of devotees waiting on them hand and foot, their attempts to live in austerity are undermined by the mountains of gifts they receive and their integrity is eroded by the admiration and acclaim that greets their every word and action no matter how commonplace. The problem is not really with the monks, it is with the system, although it is true that the monks keep the system going.

## Negativity

Theravada certainly has a marked negative outlook, negativity being the tendency to consider only the bad, the ugly or the deficient side of things. Traditionally, Theravadin monks will attend funerals but none of life's joyful or happy rites of passage. They can see the spiritual significance in sickness, decay and death but nothing positive about a wedding, a birth or a coming of age. When we look at Theravadin discourse on virtue we see this same tendency. The first chapter of the *Visuddhimagga*, that great compendium of Theravada, is entitled 'A Description of Virtue' and is the longest and most detailed analysis of morality in all traditional Theravadin literature.* According to Buddhaghosa the function of virtue is to stop bad actions and to avoid blame and its 'proximate causes' are remorse and shame.** Starting off on this negative note he proceeds in the same manner for a full fifty eight dry-as-dust pages in the English translation. There is hardly any mention of actually doing anything one would normally think of as being virtuous. Virtue is defined and described, its proximate causes and kammic effects are discussed in detail, but in the final analysis it is presented entirely as the avoiding of bad rather than the actual doing of anything good. But the *Visuddhimagga* was written centuries ago, perhaps Theravada has become more inclusive since then.

* Commenting on this analysis Damien Keown says '…despite the details provided by Buddhaghosa the harvest in terms of a deeper understanding of sila is disappointingly sparse. He skimps on what are for us the most promising areas and goes into great detail…about minute monkish matters of deportment and trivial infringements of the Vinaya…'

** By comparison the Buddha calls virtue a way of being considerate which 'creates love and respect and which conduces to helpfulness, non-dispute, harmony and unity' (A.III,287). In other places he calls virtue 'a treasure', 'the supreme adornment', 'freedom-giving', confidence-building', 'leading to happiness', 'conducive to concentration', 'bringing success', 'imparting good health' 'resulting in being liked, admired and respected', etc.

I reach up to the bookshelf behind me, pick a volume at random and look to see what it says about virtue or Right Action. I have taken Mahasi Sayadaw's commentary on the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. I turn to the section on Right Action to see what he says. '(W)hen an occasion arises for one to commit killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, if one restrains oneself from committing them, then one is established in Right Action.' Here again, virtue and goodness are understood only as avoiding bad. I reach up and take another book, again at random. This time I find I have put my hands on Khantipalo's *Lay Buddhist Practice*. Khantipalo was an English monk who spent many years teaching Theravada in the West so he may take a more positive approach. I turn to the section dealing with the five Precepts. He lists the Precepts and then says, 'These precepts are the basic and minimal observances of moral conduct by a Buddhist. They are designed to restrain him from *making bad kamma* in speech and body and to serve as a basis for further growth in the Dhamma' (italics mine). The Precepts are described correctly as the bare minimum of morality but nothing beyond this bare minimum is discussed. He mentions, again correctly, that the Precepts are the basis for further growth but as before what that growth might be (e.g. going beyond refraining from killing to actually doing something to promote the welfare or life of others) is not mentioned. I turn to the section dealing with the eight Precepts to see what Khantipalo has to say about them. 'It has always been understood by Buddhist lay people that if one undertakes these Eight Precepts then great effort should be made not to break them... If one takes them on, then one should feel reasonably certain... that none of the precepts will be broken'. Here as almost

everywhere else virtue is understood not in terms of doing something good and beneficial but in terms of not doing anything bad.

When we look at the Buddha's teachings on virtue we find that he usually balances the avoidance of wrong (varita) with the doing of good (carita). The famous epitome of the teaching from the *Dhammapada* is a typical example of this – 'Cease to do evil, learn to do good …' etc (Dhp.183). This balance of the negative with the positive, of the passive with the dynamic aspects of virtue is well illustrated by the Buddha's description of the first Precept. He says; 'Having abandoned the taking of life the monk Gotama abstains from taking life. He has laid aside the stick and the sword and abides full of consideration, kindness and compassion for the good of all living beings' (D.I,40). The commentary on this passage has a long convoluted discussion on various aspects of killing and the sub-commentary takes the opportunity to elaborate on some of these ideas at even greater length. But predictably, neither the commentary nor the sub-commentary bother to discuss even briefly the implications of the words 'abides full of consideration, kindness and compassion for the good of all living beings.' Another way in which Theravadin virtue could be said to be negative is that it is primarily selfish. The impact that one's behavior, whether good or bad, has on others is of little importance in Theravada. A Theravadin refrain from hurting others, not because he cares about them but so that he can avoid bad karma and if he does good it is not because it helps others but for the personal advantages he derive from it. Mahayanists criticized this pinched selfish understanding of sila centuries ago. In the *Upayakausala Sutra* it says; 'The Buddha teaches Bodhisattvas precepts which need not be strictly and literally observed, but teaches sravakas (Theravadins) precepts which must be strictly and literally observed; he teaches Bodhisattvas precepts which are at once permissive and prohibitive, but teaches sravakas precepts that are only prohibitive'. Another text, the *Mahayanasangraha*, stresses that sila has three facets – the encouragement of restraint, the pursuit of the good and the benefit of others. It correctly points out that the savakas only teach the first of these and practice sila only for their own benefit. As an example of the second proactive facet of sila the *Mahayanasangraha* mentions caring for the sick, getting involved in the interests of others so as to be able to teach them Dhamma, helping travelers, learning sign language in order to communicate with the deaf, protecting others from various dangers, etc. The Buddha also urges us to do things that make a positive difference to peoples lives. In the *Samyutta Nikaya* for example, he suggests planting trees along highways, constructing irrigation works, digging wells and providing shelter for the homeless (S.III,45-6). Practical and positive examples of virtuous actions like these are frequently recommended in Mahayana works but rarely if ever in the traditional literature of Theravada.

The Theravadin tendency to see virtue in negative terms has had, I believe, a profound influence on how people think and behave. In Thailand for example, people dump unwanted dogs in monasteries because with so much food going to waste there is usually enough for the strays to get at least something to eat. These *pi* dogs as they are called, are always fighting with each other and are usually thin and diseased. No one is cruel to them but no one does anything to improve their situation either. They are left to scratch their mange, defecate around the monastery and breed yet more unwanted offspring. As with dogs, so with people. Although Christians make up a tiny minority of Thailand's population they do a significant percentage of its non-governmental social work. The same is true in other Theravadin lands. Once I stayed in a large and wealthy monastery in Sri Lanka where there were a dozen or so servants, one of who was deaf and dumb. In Sri Lanka as in other peasant societies many people find human handicaps a source of amusement and in this monastery the deaf and dumb man was constantly being teased. The other servants would sneak up behind him and pull off his sarong, knock him on the head or put insects down his back to general laughter all round. Sometimes he would cry out in frustration and humiliation. I never saw the abbot or the other monks torment this poor man (although they often joined in the laughter) but they never did anything to stop others doing it. One word from the very formidable abbot would have been enough to stop this torment but that word was never spoken. In Theravada, just avoiding bad is enough. The common practice of spending the full-moon day in a monastery in order to 'practice

sila' is further evidence that Theravada sees virtue predominately in negative terms. People spend the day in the monastery in order to avoid situations that might lead them into doing anything wrong. No tradition of spending the day doing good for others had ever evolved.

The *Khuddakapatha*, the smallest book in the Pali Tipitaka, is a collection of readings and suttas including the Dvattisakara and the famous Metta Sutta. The Dvattisakara consists of a bare list of body parts and is meant to be reflected upon to help bring about a detachment or in Theravada, a revulsion, towards the body. The Metta Sutta is a beautiful and deeply stirring song advocating benevolence towards all that lives. Buddhaghosa expands the meager thirty six Pali words of the Dvattimsakara into a commentary thirty six pages long while the Metta Sutta which is more than three times the length of the Dvattisakara, is expanded into a dull and rather uninspiring commentary of only twenty one pages. It was mentioned before that of the two different schema of dependant origination all emphasis is given to the one about suffering. Why should the ancient Theravadin pundits give almost blanket coverage to the teaching describing the cause of human suffering and completely ignore the one describing the way out of that suffering? If we look at the 'links' in each of these schema we see the reason for this. The first is about 'grief, sorrow, suffering, lamentation, pain and despair' experiences that Theravadins have a fixation with. The second is about faith, gladness, joy, serenity, happiness, knowledge and vision and ultimately, freedom, things that Theravadins have little interest in. The tendency of either ignoring the positive or if commenting on it, doing so as briefly as possible or at least more briefly than the negative, is to be seen in almost every aspects of Theravada.

Now let us have a look at meditation. The Buddha taught many different types of meditation. Some of these, like the contemplation on death or the contemplation on the loathsomeness of food, could be called negative in the sense that they induce restraint, detachment and the cooling of emotions. Others like metta bhavana could be described as positive in that they uplift, give joy or awaken enthusiasm. It seems likely that the Buddha taught this rich variety of contemplations to cater to different personalities types, to help deal with specific problems, to develop certain virtues and to balance each other. Let us have a look at how meditation is presented in the *Visuddhimagga*. Buddhaghosa devotes a full eleven pages to the meditation on death while a generous twenty six pages are devoted to the meditation on the repulsiveness of the body. But it is when describing the contemplation on rotting corpses that Buddhaghosa is really in his element. Through a full nineteen pages he lingers lovingly and in minute detail over putrid flesh, bloated viscera and maggots oozing out of eye sockets. By contrast when he comes to elaborating on meditations that could lift the heart and refresh the mind his imaginativeness seems to dry up. The recollection on generosity for example, is passed over in less than three pages while the recollection on peace gets only two pages. Other positive meditation like the recollection on spiritual friendship (kalyanamittaanussati, A.V,336) are ignored completely.

Modern meditation manuals show this same preference for the negative. Most will give plenty of space to metta bhavana but other positive meditations are given little or no notice, whereas the contemplation on the loathsomeness of food and on death are nearly always included. This last contemplation and the practices surrounding it have taken on an almost talismanic significance in Theravada. Any Sri Lankan meditation center worth the name has to have its rickety old human skeleton on view. Thai meditation centers and even sometimes ordinary monasteries will often have a collection of gruesome photographs happily provided by the local police showing autopsies, bloated corpses and mutilated murder victims. A recently published book called *Treasury of Truth* consists of a translation of the Dhammapada with color pictures illustrating the verses. Twenty one percent of the pictures in the book show images of either human cadavers or skeletons. I have before me the biography of a popular contemporary Thai meditation monk which includes this paragraph. 'Watching day by day the decomposition of the bodies, he lived with these rotten corpses which became bloated, with blood and bloody fluids exuding and also with the smell of rotten flesh. To expose and search for the internal organs for contemplation, he cut open rotten

bodies, removed some organs and preserved them in liquid. Living side by side with these corpses enabled him to make good progress in the way of Dhamma.' Whether this monk really did spend months in such ghoulish surroundings I don't know but to be taken seriously as a meditator he would have to claim that he did.

In Theravada necrophilia is almost synonymous with spiritual virtuosity. The typically crude psychology of Theravada is that beauty causes attachment and therefore that wallowing in repulsiveness lead to detachment.* Ironically, if evidence is needed that this is not true one need only read the Vinaya, which contains numerous stories about monks doing this contemplation who ended up copulating with or masturbating over corpses, including those in advanced stages of decomposition (Vin.III,36). ** The Vinaya claims that up to sixty monks once committed suicide after the Buddha gave a talk in praise of the contemplation on the repulsiveness of the body (Vin.III,67). One would think this would be enough for meditation teachers to recommend this practice only with caution. Not so. It is quite usual for it to be taught to anyone who comes for meditation instruction. I personally know of numerous cases in Singapore and Malaysia where this has ended up having disastrous consequences for the people who practiced it on the instruction of monks. As with most things Mahayana takes a more balanced and positive approach to the body. While recognizing its unattractive aspects the Mahayanist is also encouraged to consider how he or she could use their bodies for the benefit of others. For example the *Akshayamati Sutra* asks the bodhisattva to think like this; ' "I must wear out even this body for the benefit of all creatures" …Seeing that it is to be used for this purpose, he looks fixedly at the misfortunes of the body and is not distressed, because he cares more about all creatures.'

* For more on this topic see Liz Wilson's *Charming Cadavers*, 1999.

** I once sat and listened as a group of young Thai monks roared with laughter and made ribald comments about a collection of particularly nauseating photos of female corpses that they were passing around to each other.

Now one might ask; 'If Theravada is so negative why are people in Theravadian lands so warm and friendly?' While it is true that people in Thailand, Sri Lanka etc. certainly are smiling and good natured the reason for this, I would submit, is not because they practice Theravada but, on the contrary, because they *don't* practice it. Anthropologist Paul Wirs correctly says, 'In reality, it is the same (in Sri Lanka) as in other Buddhist countries; only very few comprehend the true Buddhist dogma in its real profoundness; the rest are Buddhists in name only, among them also a great part of those who wear the yellow gown…' For the majority of people in Theravada lands religion goes little beyond giving dana to monks, consulting them about astrology, worshiping relics, doing pujas and perhaps keeping the Precepts on full moon days when they become very old. As soon as they start taking Dhamma study or meditation seriously that distinctive vale of Theravada gloom settles upon them and they become withdrawn, self-absorbed and morbid. Go to a festival in a Sri Lankan temple and you will find color, smiles and an atmosphere of simple piety. But then go to the typical meditation center. The buildings are as functionally ugly as a municipal toilet block, the rooms are stark, no one smiles and the mediators walk around looking like the long-term inmates of a psychiatric hospital. Indeed it is not unknown that some people who spend time in these meditation centers end up having serious mental problems. A joke circulating in certain circles in Sri Lanka in the 1990's went 'One month in Kanduboda, six months in Angoda,' Kanduboda being a well-known meditation center in Colombo and Angoda being the city's main mental asylum.

## Boredom

Because Theravada Vinaya like Theravada lay moral practice, is presented primarily as a collection of 'don'ts,' this means that a monk who does nothing can qualify to be good. Significantly, there is no Vinaya rule requiring monks to study the Dhamma, to teach it, to do anything practical to help others or even to meditate.* This deficiency was understood long ago in Mahayana and rectified by drawing up proactive rules. So for example, in the *Bodhisattavabhumi* which was meant to be an

alternative Mahayana Vinaya, not sharing things with others is an offence as is refusing to teach Dhamma when requested, ignoring people just because they are immoral, adhering to minor rules in the face of the conflicting needs of others, etc. A small number of monks have a good or even a profound knowledge of Dhamma, many have at least a basic knowledge although it is quite common to meet those who know little or none. Despite popular perception to the contrary meditation is very rare in Theravada. Spiro says, '(V)ery few village monks ever meditate, and only a hand full even claim that they do. Typically, they plead lack of time. The situation differs little in the larger urbane monasteries. In Mandalay, according to an official of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, no more than 15 per cent of monks spend any time at all in meditation. In rural Thailand, according to Ingersoll, no monks meditate. Usually, as in Burma, they say they have no time.' Anthropologist Jane Bunnag who did a study of monks in a regional Thai city wrote, 'Less than one third of my informants in Ayutthaya reported that they practiced meditation, and even these monks only meditated 'from time to time' or 'when they were free.' When questioned as to the techniques used they inevitably replied in very vague terms…Although most monks paid lip service to the idea that one should meditate… it was regarded as an activity more appropriate to nuns…to bhikkhus who were *saiyasat* (magical practitioners) or to those monks who *doen thudong* (go on pilgrimage to Buddhist shrines).' In Sri Lanka meditation is almost non-existent outside the small number of special meditation monasteries and even there it is by no means universal.** Monks who do have a vocation for study or meditation certainly have a wonderful opportunity to do their practice but they are a small minority. As for the others the motivation to do anything is small and the temptation to settle back and let the lay people make merit by catering to ones' every whim, is great. And sadly this is what many, many monks do.

* Gregory Schopen has some interesting observations on this point; see Donald Lopez Jr. *Buddhism in Practice*, 1995, pp.473 ff. One of the services that monks traditionally rendered to society was education. This education was narrow and limited but it did mean that literacy was fairly widespread amongst males, particularly in Sri Lanka and Burma.

** The recent growth of interest in meditation among lay people in Sri Lanka is one of the few encouraging religious developments in that country.

Thai and Burmese monks spend hours every day chatting with matrons and young ladies and most of the talk is village gossip, not Dhamma. In Sri Lanka monks prefer reclining in big easy chairs chewing betel and reading the paper. Even a well-run monastery with an exceptional abbot is sometimes not enough to arouse the interest or enthusiasm of more than just a few. Paul Breiter who spent years at Wat Pah Pong with Ajahn Chah wrote that most of the Thai monks there were 'a bunch of ordinary Joes whose hearts weren't completely in it.' Spiro's observations on Burma apply equally well to other Theravadin countries. 'Boredom, no doubt, accounts for the inordinate amount of sleeping one sees in monasteries - monks are forever taking naps - as well as for the dullness and apathy frequently encountered in them. I suspect too, that those...who practice alchemy, medicine, exorcism and...politics, do so not only for the intrinsic interest of the subject, but as an escape from the tedium of monastic living. Similarly, boredom probably accounts for the great interest monks show in visitors.' Others take a different escape route. In a survey of monks in Thailand anthropologist J. C. Ingersoll found that boredom was the main reason why young men left the Sangha. When Somerset Maugham was traveling through Burma he had an interpreter who had spent time in a monastery during his youth. Maugham asked him what he thought of the monk's life. 'He shrugged his shoulders. "There was nothing to do", he said. "Two hours work in the morning and there were prayers at night, but all the rest of the day nothing. I was glad when the time came for me to go home again."' And of those who stay behind their natural youthful exuberance is gradually crushed under the weight of tradition and of having lay people doing everything for them, and before long they begin doing what he sees the older monks doing - they sleep.

You could hardly believe it possible for human beings to sleep so much until you've spent time in a Theravada monastery. The most enduring images I have of my years in monasteries is of Burmese

monks dozing in chairs while their devotees massage their feet, of Thai monks lying flat on their backs snoring at ten in the morning and of somnolent old *nayaka hamdarus* in Sri Lanka getting out of bed for lunch and going straight back again after it is over. The English monk Phra Peter relates an amusing incident he witnessed when a junior monk was paying respects to his senior with the traditional three bows. The first bow went okay, the second was somewhat slower and during the third bow the monk drifted off and remained fast asleep on the floor. This pervasive slothfulness is a logical consequence of the Vinaya notion that monks must have everything done for them To quote Spiro again. 'Almost all his needs are satisfied by others, without his doing - or being permitted to do - anything on his own behalf. As we have seen, he does no work; he does not earn his own bread; even if he wants to, he cannot so much as pour his tea or lift his serving bowel, let alone tend his garden or repair his monastery. Everything he needs must be given to him by others; everything that he desires must be provided him by others. Moreover, others not only *must* provide for the monk, but in fact they *do* provide for him, and - as we have seen - with lavish hand' (italics in the original).

The almost complete absence of physical exercise coupled with the rich diet is probably the reason for the abnormally high incidence of diabetes amongst older Sri Lankan monks. A study released in 2002 showed that the leading cause of death amongst Thai monks was smoking related illnesses. Having little else to do they while away their time sleeping, chatting and puffing on Klongtips. Even monks who are interested in meditation or study are unable to refresh their minds with spells of physical exercise; the Vinaya and the public's desire to pamper monks and earn merit make this very difficult. In the late 1970's when I was staying at Peradeniya University I used to walk each afternoon through the campus and up to the beautiful Hindagala Vihara, a distance of about four miles there and back. The abbot came to know of this and each time I got to his monastery he would very kindly insist on having his driver take me back or giving me the fare so I could return by bus. He could never understand why I should want to walk when I had an alternative. Tibetan monks mold butter offerings and carve printing blocks, Chinese monks run vegetarian restaurants and practice *tai chi*, Zen monks do calligraphy and tend their gardens. Many Theravadian monks do absolutely nothing.* The only significance Theravada gives to the body is as an object of filth and disgust. The Greek or Hindu concept of developing the whole person - physical, mental and spiritual - has never been appreciated in Theravada and the end result is disastrous. Whether by friend or foe the assessment of Theravadin monks has often been the same - pleasant , gentle, smiling and utterly inert. In despair Anagarika Dharmapala cried; 'If only the monks would move themselves Buddhism wouldn't be called the religion of pessimism.' Concerning his efforts to get monks involved with Buddhist education in Sri Lanka Henry Olcott huffed in frustration; 'I am afraid we shall have to wait long for this help to come from Buddhist Bhikkhus...at least I have not been able, during an intimate intercourse of twenty-two years, to arouse their zeal.' David Maurice, a devote Buddhist who lived in Burma for years wrote, 'Spend time in Burmese monasteries and you would swear that you were really in East Africa; everyone seems to be suffering from Sleeping Sickness.'

* Perhaps one exception to this is some monks in Laos and the less Siamized Lao-speaking areas in north-east Thailand. Monks there will sometimes do strenuous physical work. Until recently this region was remote, very poor and well known for producing a small but influential number of exceptional meditating monks. Could there be a connection between hardship and work on the one hand and spirituality on the other?

Despite the large amount of free time Theravadin monks have it is astonishing how few of them seem to do anything affective to promote the Dhamma. In 1991 when I was living in Singapore I did a survey of all the Thai temples in the country. I located five temples and fifteen house temples staffed by either Thai monks or Singaporeans monks ordained and trained in Thailand, forty three monks altogether. Even before interviewing the abbots it was clear that the main activities in every one of these establishments was what can be called Thai magic - lucky charms, Four Faced Buddhas, fortune telling, black magic, protective amulets etc. One of the temples had what was called a 'Lucky Buddha' at which one is supposed to be able to predict auspicious numbers. The

temple is very popular with punters before the races on Sunday afternoon. Another temple, on Racecourse Rd, seemed to be a market rather than a place of religion. Amongst the postcards and gewgaws for sale in the main shrine hall I found key chains with mildly pornographic images on them. I asked each abbot if they or any of the monks under them meditated and several declined to answer but most said no. When I asked why several said that it is difficult to meditate in the city but most just smiled, some bidding me to continue with my questions. When I asked the abbots if they did any charitable activities four answered affirmatively saying that they sometimes gave cash to visiting monks or organized danas where monks were fed. One monk, sensing what I was getting at, insisted that he regularly sent money back to Thailand to help the poor. When I asked for details he smiled, equivocated and changed the subject. Only two places had anything beyond chanting and ceremonies where food and money is given to monks that could be described as Dhamma activities. These consisted of regular talks and discussions on Buddhism. The interesting thing was that these activities were organized entirely by a small group of lay people. No monks helped arrange the talks, attended them or delivered them. In both cases the lay people told me that the abbot allowed them to use his premises and if they didn't organize the talks no one else would. It is quite possible that a survey of Thai temples in Malaysia and perhaps in any major Thai city would a show a similar pattern.

## Out of Touch

Outside the small rural town of Matale in Sri Lanka is the site of Aloka Vihara where the Pali Tipitaka was first committed to writing in the 1st century BCE. In 1954 the abbot of this monastery decided to build an international Buddhist research library. Huge amounts of money were collected, Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia laid the foundation stone and eventually the main complex was completed. It stands there today without a single book in it. Neither the abbot or any of the monks under him knew anything about librarianship, the monastery is miles from the nearest town and there were no people in the district who could use such a library anyway. The temple's library was built for no other reason than that there was believed to have been one there two thousand one hundred years earlier. Doing things because they were supposedly done in the romanticized past, rather than to fulfill an actual need in the present, is quite typical of Sri Lankan Buddhists. I was once approached by a senior Burmese monk who asked me to help him go to the USA. He wanted to raise money to finance a expedition to the moon to prove that there really was a rabbit there, as Buddhist mythology says. While I suspect that part of his motive was desire for an all-expenses paid trip to the West, I have no doubt that he sincerely believed that his space expedition would prove successful and would help promote Buddhism. When you first move to Asia and start hearing monks say things like this it is a little disconcerting, but gradually you get used to it.

In the 1960's a well-known Sri Lankan monk conceived the idea of erecting a gigantic stupa at the entrance of the port of Colombo. The justification for this stupa was that 'ships passing Ceylon will see the light on top and know that this is a Buddhist land.' Millions of rupees were spent building the stupa and until just recently it was the highest man-made structure in the country. Today it stands there, its once white form now dirty and unpainted, the light on the top long ago broken and never replaced and the metal fittings slowly rusting in the salt air. For an entrance fee of a few rupees the visitor can climb up and look around the vast empty interior of the stupa's dome. Apart from this and providing a convenient roosting place for Colombo's numerous crows, it serves no other purpose. On top of Frazer Hill in Singapore there used to be a huge unspeakably ugly Buddha statue which had been built by a Thai monk. When you put a coin in a slot its long cement tongue would move in and out and its eyes would light up and flicker, creating such a weird effect that it took a lot of effort not to laugh. Perhaps the monk who built this monstrosity had intended to provide some comic relief for bored Singaporeans, but I don't think so. Mercifully, the government acquired this site the 1980's and demolished the Buddha. On the left of the main north bound road out of Rangoon is one of the strangest Buddhist monasteries to be seen anywhere. It looks like a cross between St Peter's in Rome, Lunar Park and a LSD trip in cement. It is so bazaar and in such

hideous taste that it is actually worth driving all the way out to see. Certainly the Burmese people who took me there were deeply impressed by the whole thing and held the rotund cigar-smoking abbot in particular awe. I don't know why this eyesore was built but judging by its size it must have cost a fortune to and taken years to complete.

Similar unrealistic, wasteful, ill-conceived or never completed religious monuments or projects are so common in Theravadin lands that they call for an explanation. Why do monks so often involve themselves in such useless undertakings? The ordinary lay Theravadin is unlikely to ever think of building a two hundred foot high cement Buddha with an escalator going up into its lap and with a flashing bright red neon halo behind its head. He or she is usually too busy just trying to make a living and feed their families. And besides, they could never get the money needed to do such things. Many monks on the other hand have little else to do than indulge in any whim or fancy that happens to drift through their minds. Further, they can be assured of financial support from the devote and they will never be called upon to justify their proposal no matter how cockeyed or unnecessary it might be. No one would ever think to question a monk's judgment or obstruct his wishes. The Theravadin concept that monks have no responsibilities but to themselves is a further encouragement to translate the dream into a reality. If his grandiose scheme falls through, goes bankrupt or is never finished he can just walk and leave others to deal with the mess. But why, it might be asked, don't they use the unstinting support and encouragement they receive for more socially useful things? A few do of course and their numbers are slowly growing but the average monk's education and lifestyle usually means that he knows and cares nothing of the realities of ordinary life. From the time he enters his monastery everything is provided for him on a silver platter, in some cases quite literally. Even if monastic education touches on real life issues they will be presented in the most rarified and theoretical way. And of course disciplines like sociology, anthropology, social work, counseling etc, which could give a more solid grounding in reality are considered too 'worldly' for monks to learn. Combine this ignorance and lack of social concern with boredom and we have yet another gigantic cement Buddha.

Even when Theravadins set out with the intention of doing something meaningful it all too often falls foul of the same unrealistic thinking, poor planning and ineptitude. A few years ago I visited Wat Tamprabhat the famous drug rehabilitation monastery out of Bangkok. It was really moving to see the abbot's genuine concern for the young men who come to him for help and there is no doubt that he has saved the lives of many of them. On the far side of the monastery there are several huge cement Buddhas towering above the trees and nearby is a large conference hall. If you wipe the dirt of one of the windows of this hall and peer in you will see that it is empty except for dust, stacks of chairs and the torn curtain that must have once hung above the stage. It couldn't have been used for years and like the big Buddhas nearby it is slowly falling into decay. It seems that when the abbot won the Magsaysay Prize for Social Service in 1974 he spent all the money on the Buddhas and the conference hall. I know of a Buddhist organization in Colombo that once published fifty thousand copies of a fairly well-written book on Buddhism. When I went to get a few copies of this book in the 1970's I saw packages of them stacked up in a large room in the organization's premises. I happened to be visiting this place again just recently and sure enough most of the books were still there only now they were completely covered in dust, mold and odd bits of junk that had been deposited in the room over the years. The motive behind this publishing project was no doubt a good one but very obviously no thought had ever been given to how many books were likely to be purchased or how they might be distributed.

Arthur Kostler wrote that when he was traveling through the Soviet Union in the 1930's the contrast between the glowing reports about bumper harvests and joyful workers that he read in the newspapers and the squalor and starvation he saw everywhere left him with a distinctly dreamlike sense of reality. Reading Theravadin journals and other literature sometimes gives one this same feeling. I know of a Sri Lankan temple in the West which went through a schism which was bitter and acrimonious even by the usual Sri Lankan standards. When the temple's next newsletter came

out there was not even a hint that there had been a disagreement within the committee let alone a court case, violent name-calling and a punch-up in the shrine room. Sometime ago I read a well-written article which convincingly argued that capital punishment would be against Theravadin Buddhist teachings. However, the article neglected to mention that all Theravadin countries have the death penalty, have had so for many centuries and that in none of them is there pressure either from the legal profession, the general public and certainly not from the Sangha, to abolish it. I don't think the author's failure to mention these relevant facts was due to dishonesty on his part. For many Theravadians the real *is* only incidental to the theory and it is not necessary to connect the two or explain any contradictions between them**.** Thus it is possible for Sri Lankan monks to give the five Precepts to soldiers before they go into battle and genuinely see nothing contradictory in this. Thai monks happily do blessings at the opening of Bangkok massage parlors and will merely smile indulgently at the Westerner who comments that this could be against the spirit of the Buddha's teachings. I used to have a picture from a Thai newspaper showing the country's then Sangharaja flicking holy water over bombers at the huge US Air Force base at Ubon before they took off to drop their deadly loads on Laos and Vietnam. I doubt whether more than a few of the millions who must have seen this picture noticed the contradiction it embodied. Obviously the Sangharaja did not either.

For about thirty years a journal called *World Buddhism* was published in Sri Lanka which contained articles on Buddhist doctrine and news of various Buddhist activities around the world. Many of the articles in this journal are well-written and informative but many others leave you wondering if they were ever meant to be taken seriously. For example we read that it was actually a Buddhist monk who discovered America, Ven Narada writes that Germany is well on the way to becoming a 'Buddhist Fortress of Europe' (this was in the early 1960's) and of course there are the usual articles about Jesus really being a Buddhist. But it is when reading the reports of the resolutions passed at various Theravadin conferences or the pronouncements by different Theravadin prelates that one really rubs ones eyes with disbelief. Some of the news reports include the campaign to make Sarnath the capital of India, a proposal to build 'Buddhist Peace Universities' in all European capitals, another suggestion to form a 'Commonwealth of Buddhist Nations,' and the campaign to establish a 'World Buddhist Army' to help settle international disputes.

**Selfishness**

Some years ago I attended a conference on Engaged Buddhism which was held on an island in a river near Bangkok. One of the guests was the then Sangharaja of Cambodia, a gentle benign old man who smoked a Sherlock Holmes pipe. After the closing ceremonies all the participants gathered on the bank of the river waiting to be ferried across to the other side where the buses were waiting. First to go was the Sangharaja. He and an attendant monk were taken across by the man who operated the raft by pulling it with ropes. When the raft got near the opposite bank the two monks jumped off simultaneously causing the raft to tip so that the man fell into the muddy water. It was a little careless of them but accidents sometimes happen. The point of my story is this though. The two monks looked back in response to the splashing and then without the slightest hesitation, without any attempt to help and without even an expression of concern on their faces, they walked to the bus and took their seats leaving the ferryman floundering in the water. I and the other Westerners who witnesses this incident winced with embarrassment and several of us went down to try to help the man. Significantly, none of the Asians at the conference seemed effected by the two monks' behavior and I strongly suspect that they would have only thought it improper if the monks *had* tried to help the man and got a little mud on themselves. The Theravadin concept of a good clergyman is the exact reverse of what it is in most other religions. Jewish, Muslim and Christian clergy are meant to be servant of their community. In Theravadin lands it is the community who are the servants of the clergy.

In the late 1990's I did several walking tours of the war-affected areas in the north and east of Sri

Lanka. A good number of monasteries were empty, the monks having left for safer areas. The idea of sharing the hardships with the people who had so long looked after them or of staying behind to give them guidance or solace in their trials would not accord with the Theravadin monk's role. The lay people are there for him and he is there for himself. An Australian woman once told me about her first experience with a Theravadian monk. She had invited a well-known monk to her town to conduct a meditation course which was to be held some fifty miles away. The woman turned up where the monk was staying with two other women who also wanted to attend the course. But when the monk came out to the car he suddenly began to look rather agitated. 'What's the problem ?' the woman asked. 'I can't go in this car' the monk replied. 'Why not?' inquired the woman. 'Because we monks are not allowed to sit on a seat with a female.' Anxious to do the right thing the woman discussed the matter with her friends and it was decided that they should wait behind while she drive the monk to the meditation center and then come back to get them. 'That will be no good' said the monk, 'because then I would be in the car alone with you and I'm not allowed to do that either.' After more discussion it was decided that the woman would go back to her home and get her son so that he could accompany her and the monk for the first leg of the journey, then she could return, drop her son back at home and then drive her friends to the venue. The monk said this would be okay but when the woman returned with her son, who was twelve years old, the monk announced that this was still no good. What was needed was an adult male. I won't bore you with the rest of the story. Suffice to say that wanting to find out something about meditation this woman ended up getting a tedious course in the minutiae of Theravada Vinaya, had to drive two hundred and sixty miles instead of a hundred, received not a word of thanks from the monk for her all efforts and that her two friends finally gave up in disgust and had to make their own ways home. The woman who told me this story said that after several other incidents of this kind she decided she'd had enough of Theravada and got involved in Zen instead. Could you blame her?

As I write this, the monastery in Malaysia where I am staying is filled with monks who had come to participate in yet another international Buddhist conference. Yesterday at about 5.20 p.m., I heard some crying outside the monks' quarters, went to see what the problem was and found a tired looking woman trying to comfort her two very irritable children. I had seen her several times earlier the same day and asked her what she was doing there. She told me that at about 11 a.m. she and her family had come to the morning puja and to serve the dana after which two visiting monks had asked her husband to take them out to buy something. She was still waiting for him to return. As she spoke a car pulled up, two Sri Lankan monks got out and after profusely thanking the driver they disappeared into their rooms carrying numerous shopping bags and excitedly chatting to each other. The woman gave the monks a wan smile as they passed then got into the car with her crying children and they all drove off. Later I found out that after the monks had got the things they wanted they asked the man to take them to the another shopping center, then to the town's main tourist attractions and then to the zoo. In keeping with their Theravadin conditioning they had given no thought whatsoever to the needs of the man or his family and the man for his part wouldn't have dreamed of refusing the monks' requests. It is also very possible that he had offered to pay for all the goodies the monks brought and that the offer had been accepted, although I could not verify this. The only thing about this incident which is atypical is that the monks actually thanked the man.

I know of a monk who consented to give a talk on Buddhism to an inter-religious conference. As he got up to deliver his address he suddenly remembered that the Vinaya forbids a monk teaching the Dhamma to anyone wearing shoes (Sekhiya 61) and of course everyone in the conference had the offending items on their feet. After long discussions with the organizers the audience was informed of the problem and asked if they would take their shoes off. To their credit they had the good grace and the good manners to acquiesce to the monk's requirements. But the good grace and the good manners almost always comes from the other party, not the Theravadin monk. He is very used to getting his own way and if that means inconveniencing, as in this case, a hundred or more people, then so be it. Spiro observes; 'It is rare that a layman visiting the monastery is not requested by the monk to do something for him; to run an errand, make a delivery, drive him to some

destination. That the visitor might be busy, might not have the time, might be going in the opposite direction - these possibilities never seem to enter his mind. This concern for self is observed not only in episodic events of this type. In one of the villages in which I worked, to give a fairly usual example, the pupils in the state school had the task of collecting the monk's alms food (which is of course, is an important means for acquiring merit). After collecting the food, they would serve the monk his meal and clean up when he had finished. Only then did he permit them to go to school. As a result they were deprived of at least an hour's schoolwork in the morning, and the teachers could do nothing but mark time until they arrived. The inconvenience for the teachers and the educational deprivation for the students presumably never entered the monk's mind… At a funeral, especially, what might be called the 'institutionalized narcissism' of the monk is clearly to be seen. Although they have just suffered the loss of a loved one, it is not the bereaved but the monk whose needs must be attended to. In accordance with his role requirements the monk expresses no sympathy to the bereaved for their loss, he offers no consolation and in general shows no special concern for them. Rather it is *he* who is the object of concern. It is he for who the food is bought, it is he who is fed; it is he who must be brought from and returned to the monastery' (italics in the original).

This kind of self-preoccupation without any concern for its consequences on others is the norm with monks and would unfortunately be easy to justify from some passages in the Tipitaka. The story of Sangamaji is a more glaring and unattractive example of this. One day the monk Sangamaji was sitting at the foot of a tree resting when his former wife approached him holding their infant son and said, 'I have a child. Support me.' Sangamaji said nothing. Three times she asked and each time he refused to respond. Finally she lay the infant in front of Sungamji and said, 'At least support your son.' Again there was no response. Leaving the child she walked away and after a while surreptitiously looked back to see what her husband was doing but as before he neither spoke to or even looked at his offspring. Realizing that she was going to get neither help or even sympathy from her husband the poor woman walked back, got the child and left. At the end of this story the Buddha supposedly praises Sangamaji as 'a true brahmin' (Ud.5-6). We are not informed about the woman's subsequent struggles and hardships as an abandoned mother.

I still vividly recall my first encounter with the 'institutionalized narcissism' of Theravada. I had just arrived in Sri Lanka and had been asked by the abbot of the monastery where I was staying to attend a dana or ceremonial feeding. It was in 1976 when there was food rationing and widespread hunger in the Island. The abbot had asked me to accompany four other monks. My companions grumbled because the only way to get to the house was by bus and they wanted to go by car. The house turned out to be a slum, our hosts were a desperately poor family and the dana was for their infant daughter who had died seven days previously. The senior monk gave the usual glib sermon about what a waste of time it is to grieve because death is inevitable and then we were served an enormous meal. I found it difficult to eat. The heartbroken mother, her gaunt children and the wrenched house had all taken my appetite away. The other monks showed not the slightest interest in the family's tragedy and tucked into the food with the usual gusto. At the end of the meal we were each given a tin of powered milk, a rare and expensive luxury at the time, and it is quite possible that the family had borrowed money to provide us with our meal and gift. When we got up to go I hid my tin under the seat hoping that the mother would find it later and use it to feed her surviving children. As we left there were a few whispered exchanges and the man of the house ran off to get a taxi. The senior monk had subtly suggested to him that it might be better if we returned to the temple in the style to which monks are accustomed. No doubt he 'did not expressly give a command' and was careful to 'word it right' as Thanissaro and Ariyesako would recommend. Unfortunately, before the taxi arrived the woman found the tin of milk and rushed out to give it to me. I told her gently that I didn't need it and that she should keep it but this suggestion horrified her and she insisted that I take it. The man arrived with the taxi, gave yet more of his meager earnings to the driver for the fare and we left. As we drove back to the temple one of the monks quite innocently said to me; 'You don't want your tin of milk so can I have it?'

The Sri Lankan scholar H.L.Seneviratne suggests that the esteem monks are held in, their complete alienation from physical work and their comfortable lifestyles ‘contributes to an explanation of the paradox of an allegedly infinitely compassionate order’s appalling insensitivity to large-scale human suffering...The effect of these cultural notions also contributes to an isolation of monks from a realistic and felt idea of the economic hardship of the ordinary people.’ He concludes bluntly but I believe accurately; ‘It (is) not possible for even ordinary social concern, far less radical concern, to arise in such a group.’ Theravadin fundamentalists paint a rosy picture of how strict Vinaya practice helps, nay how it is essential, for a monk’s spiritual progress and how it benefits the lay community. The real outcome of such teachings and practices is sometimes so grotesque that it is even difficult to think about.

## Asceticism

In the early days a monks’ life was free but insecure. If he went begging he might get a good meal or he might get nothing. Some people respected monks while others scorned them. In good times a monk could manage while in times of trouble or famine just staying alive was a struggle. But those days are long gone. Theravadin monks are accorded respect, privilege, deference and honor probably unequaled by any group of people on earth except the few remaining absolute monarchs. And simply to be a monk is sufficient to qualify for such treatment. In Burma it is considered disrespectful even to walk on a monk’s shadow! Such notions makes austerity or even just simplicity of lifestyle virtually impossible. Theravadin monks have not really renounced the world, they have been elevated to the highest position in the world. Far from living in austerity most monks live pampered, secure and very comfortable lives while making at most a feeble pretense at asceticism. This pretense begins even before one actually becomes a monk. To be ordained in Theravada can be a very expensive affair. In Thailand an abbot can only ordain monks if he has been authorized to do so by the Department of Religious Affairs on the recommendation of the Ecclesiastical Council. Such abbots can make so much money from the ‘customary gifts’ they receive at ordination ceremonies that they commonly pay huge bribes to the Department or the monks on the Council for the right to ordain others. In Sri Lanka in the 1990’s the average ordination ceremony cost the equivalent to four months wages of the ordinary office worker. In Burma it is considered meritorious for the rich to pay for a poor youth’s ordination if his parents are unable to afford the expense. It is something of a paradox that in Theravada renouncing the world can cost so much that the poor can’t afford to do it. In Thailand and Burma all young men become monks at least once in their lives with the full intention of leaving after a while. The attitude is; ‘I’m going to renounce the world for a while. Will you look after my car and just keep your eye on my girlfriend while I’m away ?’ This sort of ‘reversible renunciation’ makes a mockery of the whole idea of the monk’s life. At the time of the Buddha naked ascetics used to encourage their disciples to undergo similar temporary ordinations. They would take off their clothes, pretend to give up all their possessions, act like an ascetic and the next day dress again and resume their normal lives. The Buddha said that their claims to have ‘renounced’ were no better than telling lies (A.I,205).

Once someone does become a monk, whether with genuine intentions or not, he enters a world of privilege and abundance. The only hardship he has to endure is dealing with sexual frustration and trying to find something to do to keep from becoming bored. In the better monasteries there are things to do like sweeping the grounds, going on pindapata and learning a few suttas by heart but this is hardly a heavy schedule. In places like the north and east of Sri Lanka and in up-country Burma there are monasteries that are relatively poor but even here the monks always live better than the lay people do. Most monasteries are well appointed, many, particularly in Thailand, could only be described as luxurious. In rural areas it is common that the local monastery is the only place in the village with a television, air conditioning or fans, cement buildings, tiled roof, running water, a car and servants. And all this is acquired without doing anything more laborious than putting on a yellow robe. Just recently I stayed with a friendly Thai monk who I have known for some time. I noticed that on the wall next to his bed was a small hook with a very expensive wrist watch hanging

on it and that on the far wall on the other side of his bed was another one. I was a bit intrigued by this and asked him why he had done it. He told me that he had placed the two watches where they were so that when he woke up in the morning no matter what side he was sleeping on he could see what the time was without having to roll over. It never ceases to amaze me how many expensive things Theravada monks are able to accumulate while still maintaining that they are simple ascetics who have renounced the world.

Despite this thoroughly domesticated lifestyle the language of asceticism is used all the time. No matter how opulent a Sri Lankan monastery might be it is always referred to as a '*pansala,*' a leaf hut. Before Burmese monks begin eating those veritable banquets they consume every lunch time they chant verses which refer to the food as '*pindapata,'* alms food acquired by begging. Despite the fact that almost all monks in Sri Lanka and Burma are the legal owners of their temples and the often extensive lands that go with them, each year at the start of the rains retreat lay people 'invite' the monks to reside in the temple for the next three months. Sometimes the fake asceticism moves beyond the culturally excepted forms to become truly laughable. In the last decade or so it had has become something of a fad for Thai monks to go dhutanga, the dhutangas being the thirteen ascetic practices allowed by the Buddha. A monk will get his supporters to buy him the whole kit - the fancy bowl with all the attachments ( stand, lid, straps, carrying bag etc.) the umbrella, the mosquito net and of course the obligatory dark-brown robe. The whole outfit can cost thousands of *bhats*. Then his supporters will drive him to some pleasant national park where he might spend the long weekend sleeping under a tree and posing for photos while the supporters camp nearby preparing delicious food for him. The monk will return to his temple satisfied that he has spent time doing the ascetic practices and his supporters will be genuinely convinced that they have earned more merit than usual by helping an ascetic monk. Of course there are a few real dhutanga monks in Thailand too but until recently that they have been looked upon with a degree of suspicion. In the 1970's Jane Bunnag found that such monks were 'frequently regarded as being on a par with tramps, beggars and other kinds of social derelicts.' You see, the Thais like to be absolutely sure that a monk is real, (i.e. has his *bisuthee*, official monks' ID card stating that he has undergone the properly performed ordination ceremony) before they give him anything otherwise their generosity wouldn't earn them any merit. And you can never be quite sure with those ragged, sweaty monks who don't stay in monasteries. The weekend ascetics are a much safer investment.

The reality is that despite claiming to be ascetics, insisting on receiving all the respect due to ascetics and using the language of asceticism, the life of the average Theravadin monk differs remarkably little from that of the average lay person, except in three area. Most lay people are not celibate while all monks must be. Lay people have to work to get the things they need while monks do not. While enjoying all the advantages of ownership, security and social status monks have none of the responsibilities or obligations which go with such things. More often than not real austerity is even seen as inappropriate for such delicate and revered creatures as monks. I recall an incident that happened to me during my first months in Sri Lanka. I had gone on pilgrimage to Anuradhapura with three other Western monks. None of us had been in the Sangha long and we were still naïve enough to think that hardihood and roughing it a bit was a part of a Theravadin monk's life. We arrived late at the monastery where we were to stay, all the lights were off and everyone seemed to be asleep. Rather than wake the inmates we decided to spread out our robes under a tree in the large garden in front of the monastery and sleep there. The next morning when our hosts found that we had slept in the open and on the ground they were flabbergasted. There were gasps of amazement, guffaws of laughter and fingers put up to ears and moved in a circular manner to indicate insanity. When the senior monk, Ven. Madihe Pannasiha, heard what had happened he called us to his room and severely reprimanded us. What on earth were we playing at? Thank goodness none of the lay people had seen us. What were we trying to do – lower the Sangha's dignity in the eyes of the *dayakas*? We were supposed to be monks for goodness sake, not vagabonds! The very idea! He finished by making it clear that if we pulled any more ascetic stunts like that he would send us packing. During the few days we stayed in this monastery the other monks would always break into

giggles when they saw us.

Periodically throughout the centuries sincere monks have tried to live in real austerity but they have rarely succeeded for long. In Sri Lanka during the 8th century a group of monks, disgusted by the worldliness of the majority, took to living in the forest and wearing robes made out of rags and hence their name, the Pansakulakas. They inspired great reverence and soon devotees were lining up to shower them with praise and gifts. We read in the *Culavamsa* that one king offered them robes made out of his own clothe of gold royal gowns and equipment 'fit for royalty.' Another text even lists some of the expensive delicacies that were fed to them. Naturally, it wasn't long before the Pansakulakas were as lax and wealthy, as corrupt and as worldly as the others. It is true to say that Theravada contains an in-built mechanism for the degeneration of the Sangha and the passivity of the laity to anything beyond giving to monks. Lay people can not attain enlightenment so the most they can do is worship monks and shower them with gifts in the hope of making merit for the next life. The more austere the monk, the greater the adulation he receives, the more lavish the gifts he is given and the more likely he is to become corrupted.

## Excess and Wastage

In Theravadin lands vast resources are spent on religion in general and on the Sangha in particular. The *Mahavamsa* notes with approval that during his eleven year reign King Udaya spent 1,300,000 gold pieces on the Sangha and on various religious ceremonies. Nissankamalla spent a staggering 4,700,000 gold pieces on conducting just two ceremonies at a particular monastery. Such extravagances are frequently mentioned in the clerical histories as proof of a monarch's piety and as an encouragement for later kings to outdo their predecessors. The Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon is sheathed in more that sixty tons of gold and crowned with a umbrella encrusted with thousands of diamonds and other precious stones. This in turn is topped with a huge seventy six carat diamond. Every year the lower portions of the pagoda and its accompanying shrines are covered with twenty eight thousand pieces of gold leaf. The effect of all this is to create one of the most enchantingly beautiful religious monuments to be seen anywhere. Nonetheless, one cannot help thinking that the Buddha, a man who refused even to touch gold, might prefer being honored by having this wealth used to help alleviate some of Burma's appalling poverty. Spiro estimated that in the area of Burma he studied most families spent an average of 40% of their disposable income on the Sangha. Other studies in different parts of Burma have showed that the percentage can be even higher.

But it is not just that monks have so much, a lot of what they are given is wasted. In Sri Lanka while monks are eating lay people will come around to see if they need more food. Typically the monks allow food to keep being piled on their plates so that when they have finished eating there is as much left over as has been consumed. When the sweet plates are collected at the end of the meal there will be slices of cake with the icing eaten off the top, apples with one or two bites taken out of them and half eaten biscuits. And of course all this food is just thrown away. I have seen Theravadin monks from Bangladesh, a country where hunger and malnutrition are endemic, do exactly the same things. They are guaranteed a full meal tomorrow, they don't have to pay for it and so they just don't care. When people offer you soap or towels you may politely tell them that you already have more than enough but it will make no difference. They will insist that you take their gifts. Many times I have had conversations that went something like this; 'Venerable sir, would you like a cup of tea?' 'No thanks.' 'Coffee?' 'No thanks'. 'Would you like some fruit juice then.' 'Not now. Maybe later.' 'Then how about a glass of Milo?' 'No.' 'Then can I get you a drink of mineral water?' etc, etc etc. The first visitor to the monastery will do this, then the second may go through the same routine and so on. Eventually, worn down by the relentless desire to give, you surrender, accept what's offered, take a sip out of it just to please the donor and the rest is later tipped down the sink.

Theravada encourages excess in the amount given to the Sangha and also in how and what is given.

The more extravagant the gift or difficult the giving, the greater the devotion demonstrated and the amount of merit earned. The idea of going to any extreme in order to provide lavishly for the Sangha was already being promoted by the time the Vinaya was composed. We are told that some people ‘did not consume tasty solid food and drinks themselves and they did not give it to their parents, not to their wives and children, not to their servants or slaves, not to their friends or colleagues and they did not give it to their relations. But they did give it to monks who as a result were handsome, plump, with bright complexions and good features’ (Vin.III,87). We are also told that during a famine in Vesali people deprived their children of food in order to feed the monks (Vin.I,86-7). In the commentaries and later Theravadin literature this notion appears in their most disgraceful and self-serving form. There is a story about a man named Darubhandaka Mahatissa who sold his daughter into slavery so he could buy sumptuous food for monks. After working for half a year he manages to earn enough money to redeem the girl. But just as he was about to do so, he say saw a monk who was going to miss his midday meal and so spent all the money buying food for him instead. We have the story about the poor woman who fed her daughter scraps so she could provide lavish meals to the monk named Mahamitta. Then there was the woman who, during a famine, found a scrap of food and was about to give it to her starving baby but then saw a monk walking by with his begging bowl and gave it to him instead. The text then describes the wonderful celestial mansion this woman was born into after she starved to death. Compare this last story with that about Rukmavati from a Mahayana work called the *Avadanakalpalata*. Rukmavati was well known for her compassion to the poor. One day she saw a woman so starved that she was about to eat her own child and was in a quandary as to what to do. If she ran home to get food for the woman the child might be eaten in the meantime. If she took the child home with her the famished mother might die. With no time to wait she cut some flesh from her owns breasts and gave it to the starving woman to eat. The two stories epitomize perfectly the different concerns of Theravada and Mahayana.

Stories like the one about the man selling his daughter, and there are many of them, are never accompanied by any suggestion that what these people were doing was extreme or that monks should discourage such misguided devotion. Indeed, such behavior is held up as the ideal. Of course, this does not mean that people actually did sell their children or deprive them in order to give to the Sangha but very clearly this what the monks who composed or recorded such stories wanted to encourage. And such excess is still being encouraged. In Singapore and Malaysia nowadays it has become popular to invite large numbers of monks from overseas for a dana. Sometimes as many as a hundred are flown in from Thailand or Sri Lanka just so that people can give them a meal. The air fare and the expense of accommodating and looking after these monks for a few days means that the cost of the meal given to each can amount to $1000 or more.

Extravagance towards the Sangha is very common and suggests that generosity as taught in Theravada is different from how most people would think of it. We give or share for a variety of reasons, the most common being to fulfill a specific need of the recipient. But this is not particularly important for Theravadins. Once I was invited to stay for a while in a Sri Lankan Buddhist society in Australia. They didn’t have a resident monk but visiting monks would sometimes stay there. The monk’s room was rather cluttered and untidy and so I decided to clean it up. In the process I found over two hundred cakes of soap, sixty tooth brushes, a large number of towels, flannels and robes (I can’t remember the exact number), nine electric heaters, a dozen or so digital clocks and innumerable of other things that had been offered to various visiting monks but never used. During my last visit to Burma I stayed in a monastery and in the large room where the abbot talked to visitors there were seventy four clocks hanging on the walls! I need hardly add here that as this was a Theravadin monastery most of the clocks told a different time. I know of a group of Burmese monks living in Malaysia who encourage their devotees to offer them robes for the kathina and also to offer extra robes to be given to monks back in Burma. Now Burmese monks are very particular, they will only wear Burmese-made robes. So this is what happens. Robes are purchased in Burma, shipped to Malaysia, re-purchased by the devotees, offered to the monks, shipped back to Burma

and then given to other monks there. I also know that whatever monks in Burma need they are never in need of robes because people are always offering them. Cupboards and store rooms in monasteries are usually stuffed with robes. So when the monks back in Burma receive their well-traveled robes I strongly suspect that they sell them to the local robe shop, which is a common way of getting rid of excess robes and earning a bit of extra cash. From there someone may very well purchase them to ship off to Malaysia again. I once witnessed a Thai monk popularly believed to be an arahat going on pindapata. Several thousand people stood in two parallel lines while he walked between them and accepted their alms. When his bowl was full he would tip the food into large cardboard boxes carried by attendants. He did this again and again and at the end of the 'pindapata' there were about two hundred of these boxes full of food. I was told that some of this was given to the poor and maybe it was. The crowds eat some but as it was either squashed, limp or churned into an unappetizing mush most of it was simply thrown away.

Wastage is never a good thing – it shows thoughtlessness and a lack of respect for both the community and the environment. But in Sri Lanka, Burma, Laos and Cambodia, amongst the poorest countries in the world, it is little short of criminal. Why do people want to keep giving to monks even after they have more than can possibly use? Why is generosity to the needy, where it exists at all, only an after-thought? Why does Theravadin generosity involve so much wastage? Chapter four of the book *The Teachings of the Buddha* published by Burma's Ministry of Religious Affairs as a text book for teaching Theravada is called Dispensing Charity. In it charity is explained exclusively in terms of giving to the Sangha or to making offerings to statues. There is not even a hint that the unfortunate, the poor, the sick or even friends and neighbors are fit recipients for one's generosity.

Another book I have just read called *A Course in Basic Buddhism* published by the Klang and Coast Buddhist Society in Malaysia highlights even better the characteristics of generosity as taught in Theravada. In the chapter on dana there are sections on the meaning of sanghika dana, the right time to give to monks, the correct way to make the offering and of course on 'the great wealth, riches and prosperity' one will gain by giving to monks. There is no mention of being generous to anyone other than monks. The chapter on the ten Meritorious Deeds gives ten examples of generosity, eight of these concern giving to monks or monasteries while only one, donating one's organs after death, could be said to benefit anyone other than monks. On page 48 there is a helpful chart listing fourteen types of recipients and the amount of merit gained by giving to each. The smallest remuneration at the bottom of the list comes from giving to animals. Just above that come the poor. The amount of merit earned by giving to those who have attained any of the four stages of enlightenment (in Theravada this almost always means monks) is 'immeasurable.' Quite clearly only a fool would bother to give to animals or to the poor and that's why Theravadins rarely do so. On page 55 of this book there are two sentences – I repeat, two sentences - recommending helping charitable organizations and nursing the sick. This is a nice touch but it is hardly noticed amongst the pages of text about giving to the Sangha and the mercenary calculations about the material benefits one will gain by doing so.

I have a booklet on giving written by the respected Thai meditation teacher Phra Panyapatipo. The author is quite up-front about the purpose of his booklet, it is entitled *How To Get Good Results from Doing Merit*.' He says that if you offer monks food you will have good health in your next life, if you offer them candles or flash lights you will have good eye sight and if you offer Buddha statues you will be as beautiful as a Buddha image. Offer soap and skin lotion to monks and you will have beautiful skin, give money or material to build a temple will get you a nice house, while tooth paste or tooth brushes will result in good teeth, At the end of this long list Phra Panyapatipo adds that if you build an eye hospital you will have good eyes and that if you donate your organs you will have a fit body. Like the other claims this is simplistic in the extreme (although in complete accordance with Theravada teaching) but at least it suggests that generosity can be extended beyond the Sangha – a rare touch indeed. Theravada has turned one of the most lovely

virtues, giving, into just another form of selfish getting. How different all this mercenary giving is from that taught in the Mahayana sutras where one is encouraged to give without thinking only of oneself. The *Narayanapariprccha* for example says; 'Noble sir, the bodhisattva must think like this, "I have devoted my very body for the benefit of others. How much more material things?… I will relinquish my possessions without regret, without grudging, without wanting merit, without making distinctions between persons, out of kindness, out of compassion, to be theirs to have, so that these beings… may know the good Dharma."'

It should be emphasize here that the three publications mentioned above were not written by simple unsophisticated peasants or meant for such people. They were written by informed Theravadins well-versed in orthodox doctrine and they express notions elaborated in the commentaries, in hundreds of similar publications and in thousands of sermons preached every week throughout the Theravadin world. These notions guarantee that genuine charities will go begging and that monasteries will be places of surfeit and wastage. Just as bad, they also both express and reinforce a profound misunderstanding of what giving and sharing are supposed to be about. The idea of giving for the simple joy of giving, of giving out of compassion, of giving to those in genuine need is rarely if ever discussed in traditional Theravadin literature or even in modern expositions. The idea of giving anonymously or with modesty is equally rare. One gives in order to get merit but if one can also get the admiration and praise of one's fellows so much the better. In Burmese monasteries almost everything has the name of the donor written on it, the cost is sometimes included as well. In Sri Lankan and Thai monasteries during festivals loud speakers turned up full-bore screech out the names of who gave what and how much it cost them. Giving modestly or quietly as Hatthaka did is not a virtue in Theravada (A.IV,113). The cloying abundance one sees in monasteries, the thoughtless wastage and the incongruity of supposed renunciants living in luxury while ordinary folk live in want, are all the logical outcome of the Theravadin doctrines that one gives in order to get and that the best recipient of one's generosity is the Sangha.

## A Woman's Place

The Buddha had an ambivalent attitude towards women. While acknowledging that they are as capable of awakening as men there were also times when he seems to have been skeptical about their moral and spiritual abilities. Theravada on the other hand is quite unambiguous on this matter – it is uniformly misogynistic. In fact, Theravada's exclusion of women from a meaningful role in the spiritual life has been even more complete than that of Islam's. There have been at least a few Muslim women saints, poets and theologians; in Theravada until the $20^{th}$ century there have been none that I know of. This exclusion of woman is particularly ironic when one realizes that to a very large extent it is woman who seem to keep the religion alive. In Theravadin countries women are the most conspicuously pious. It is mainly they who look after the monks, run around for them and make sure their dana arrives on time. Audiences at sermons are often made up almost entirely of women. Go to any monastery in Sri Lanka on a full moon day and the overwhelming majority of those keeping the eight Precepts will be women, usually, as at sermons, very old ones.

Despite this monks treat all females as being physically and ritually impure. Thai monks will not take anything directly from a woman's hand and in Burma they will not visit the home of a woman who is menstruating nor will a woman in that condition visit a monastery or temple. In Thailand, particularly in the north, women are not allowed to circumambulate stupas because their inherent impurity will destroy the power of the relic within. In Burma they are not allowed to touch certain sacred Buddha images, enter simas or even some particularly holy shrines. When I visited the beautiful shrine at Kathiayo in Burma I noticed the large sign for the benefit of Western female tourists. It read, 'Ladies Must Not Enter.' Burmese women need no such signs – they know their place. Apparently, even the image of a woman can be polluting. I recently came to learn that some people in Thailand consider it an offence against the Vinaya for a monk to accidentally touch a picture of female while reading a newspaper or magazine. A Buddhist group in Europe recently

invited a visiting Thai prelate to a function and one of their members, a women who spoke Thai, translated his talk. Later the Thai ambassador who had also attended this function informed the group that they had gravely insulted the prelate and made him break his Vinaya by allowing his words to be 'touched' by the woman. Theravadin apologists say that these and numerous other embarrassing ideas and practices are the result of misunderstanding and superstition and are not 'real Theravada.' But with monks having such pervasive influence and teaching 'real Theravada' for so many centuries one can only wonder how such superstitions have managed to survive. The truth is that the monks *do* teach such things and where they do not they have never bothered to teach against them.

The nun's Sangha was founded by the Buddha himself and has managed to survive down to the present in several Mahayana countries.* In Theravada, the nun's Sangha flourished for a few centuries, then went into a long period of neglect and decline and finally died out around the turn of the first millennium. Until recently no attempt was ever made to reestablish it. In Burma and Thailand the Sangha hierarchy can and definitely will use their influence with the secular authorities to prevent the nun's Sangha being reestablished within their respective countries. It often seems that the only way to arouse the Sangha into action is to suggest changing anything. As with a lot of other things the situation is somewhat better in Sri Lanka. There the Sangha does not have the power to stop the revival of the nun's Sangha and a few progressive monks and lay people are even encouraging towards such moves. However, the attempts in this direction have so far been inept and have received little popular support. As one would expect from Theravadins, emphasis has been on the problem of getting a 'valid' ordination ceremony rather than on more important issues such as education, training, selecting promising candidates and giving careful thought to what form a modern nun's Sangha should take.

*Western women who believe that females were given more place in Mahayana and Vajrayana should read Ronald Davidson's fascinating and erudite *Indian Esoteric Buddhism – A Social History of the Tantric Movement*, 2002, p. 91 ff.

### Feminization

One cannot help but notice how much time Theravadin monks spend in the company of females. There are good reasons for this. Like the monks themselves many middle and upper class Asian women have little to do. These ladies will hover around the table as monks eat, fussing over them and occasionally pointing to particular dishes and suggesting that the monk try that because she prepared it especially for him. Ask for a glass of orange juice and they will lovingly put three spoons of sugar in it instead of the usual one. Reach for the water bottle and they will rush up and unscrew the top for you. Wipe your mouth with the paper napkin and it will be immediately whisked away and be replaced by a new one. They cut the fruit into small bite-sized cubes and put a toothpick in each so that the monks can eat it with ease. In Burma they actually *peel the grapes* for the monks. I am not joking, this is absolutely true! Years of this sort of female pampering combined with few duties and constant adulation has a devastating effect on a male.

Like spoiled children many Theravadin monks end up having a marked preoccupation with their health. The cupboards in the monks' rooms are cluttered with aspirins, balms, various creams and bottles of vitamin tablets and the cupboards in the danasalas are stocked with jars of fortified drinks and supplements. Elderly ladies are always inquiring about monks' health and any suggestion that he has 'a slight headache' or that he's 'feeling a bit poorly this morning' will initiate yet another round of anxious medicine buying. It is quite difficult to stave off all the female attention. Saying that you would like to do this yourself or that you already have enough of that will be met with either a disappointed look or unrelenting insistence. Last time I was in Burma I found the food so rich that on several occasions I decided to fast for a day. When I didn't come to the danasala in one place where I was staying a contingent of very formidable matrons came to see what was wrong.

‘Are you sick venerable sir ?’ ‘No, I’ve decided just not to eat today.’ Eyes popped open, jaws drop with disbelief and then the breaking down process commenced. ‘How about having just a little?’ ‘No thanks. I’d really like to give my stomach a rest.’ ‘Have some fruit then. You must keep your strength up’. ‘No, it’s quite okay’. ‘Then what about some soup’? ‘No, I’m having nothing today’ etc, etc, etc. In this instance I held my ground and the matrons went off shaking their heads with a combination of bewilderment and admiration. But it is easy to give in when one is assailed with this kind of thing day after day. It is hard to blame monks for allowing themselves to be overindulged, devotees can be very persistent. It is equally hard to blame lay people; for centuries this is what Theravada has taught them to do. Both are caught up in a vicious circle. Each spoils the other.

I ’m not sure what the unconscious motivation behind all this female pampering and fussing is but it is probably not a healthy one. Certainly it has tended to make many monks soft and effete so that they are unable or unwilling too deal with the knocks and blows of ordinary life. Thanissaro claims that certain Vinaya rules are meant to shield monks from cares ‘that are most burdensome to a sensitive mind.’ I can’t help feeling that notions like this have encouraged monks to see themselves and to be seen by others as precious creatures for whom any responsibilities, duties, pressure or work would upset their dainty contemplations, endanger their fragile virtues and hurt their delicate constitutions. Just how delicate monks are considered is well illustrated by what happens on public transport. In most other places in the world males stand up and gives their seats to pregnant women and elderly ladies. In Theravadin lands everyone - pregnant women and elderly ladies included - get up for the monks. How different we have become from the courageous and compassionate Buddha who went into the lonely forest to confront Angulimala (M.II,98). What a chasm there is between us and the brave and determined Punna who went to teach in the Sunaparanta country despite knowing the dangers involved (M.III,267).

Of course some monks try to break free from the life of pampering and go to the forest where they can live as the monks of old did. But people believe they will get even more merit if they give to a meditating monk and so it will not be long before they seek him out and begin to shower him with gifts and adulation again. I well recall my stay at beautiful forest hermitage in Karanbhagala in the south of Sri Lanka. Every day three or four bus and truck loads of devotees would come just to feed the five monks living there. The tables groaned with rich food, the store rooms were crammed to capacity with soap, towels, pillows, umbrellas, robes, etc. They, like other sincere monks, try their best to maintain their life of simplicity but it is a constant struggle and they have more than they can use, more than they need, even more than they can store up. The devotees could keep some of their abundance and give it to charity but they would get only meager merit from this and so they don’t. The monks could share some of their excess with the many dirt poor people in the area but if they did the donors would be far from happy. And so, like it or not, even sincere monks end up with more and more. The phenomenon is to be seen all over the Theravada world. The better the monk, the more attention he receives, the more likely he is to become soft, spoiled and surrounded by luxuries.

## Myth and Reality

When Theravadins wish to recommend their version of the Buddha’s teachings to others they often say things about it which sound very impressive but which bear little relation to reality. Some of these claims have been repeated so frequently and often in almost the same words that they have become literally slogans -‘Buddhism teaches that you should not just believe but find out for yourself;’ ‘Buddhism it not a religion, it is a way of life;’ ‘Buddhism is rational’; Buddhism is not pessimistic or optimistic, it is realistic.’ Western Theravadins can be excused for believing and then repeating such claims; they usually know little about how Theravada is practiced in Asia and even less about its history. The situation is very different with Asian Theravadins and to that degree they are guilty of a good deal of dishonesty. One of the most often repeated of these slogan-like claims is ‘Not a drop of blood has ever been shed in the name of Buddhism,’ by which of course is meant

Theravadin Buddhism. Even a cursory acquaintance with Asian history will show that this claim is baseless.

Take the career of King Anawarhta (1044-77) the monarch who made Theravada the state religion of Burma. After his conversion by the monk Shin Arahan Anawarhta's first task was to acquire the Pali scriptures. The nearest copy was in the neighboring kingdom of Thaton which was invaded, its capital sacked and the scriptures triumphantly brought to Pagan on the backs of a train of elephants. The king of Thaton and his family lived out their remaining days as slaves in a monastery. To get relics to enshrine in the numerous stupas he was building Anawarhta then invaded Prome, stripped its temples of their gold, broke open its stupas and carted everything off to Pagan again. The next victim was Arakhan which possessed the revered Mahamuni Image that the king was determined to get to glorify his capital. This time the battles were inconclusive and the king had to be content with some less sacred images and relics. After this Anawrahta turned his pious and belligerent eyes to Nanchao where the Tooth Relic was enshrined. The king of Nanchao managed to avert disaster with an unexpectedly impressive show of arms and by buying off Anawrahta with a jade Buddha image which had come into contact with the Relic. All Anawarhta's campaigns were opposed militarily and must have resulted in a great deal of bloodshed although no figures are given in the ancient records. The clerics who recorded these events were only interested in the number of monks Anawarhta fed and the number of monasteries he built, not in how many people he slaughtered. However, what is clear is that these wars qualify to be called religious wars. Shin Arahan probably encouraged the king's aggression although there is no record of this; on the other hand there is no record that he ever tried to discourage his warmongering or restrain it either.

Now let us have a look at perhaps the most well-known and admired personality from Sri Lankan history, Dutthagamini. The story of Dutthagamini is recounted in the *Mahavamsa*, the official history of Theravada in Sri Lanka. For about seventy six years a line of non-Buddhist Tamils had been ruling Sri Lanka when in 101 BCE Prince Dutthagamini began a campaign to overthrow them and make himself king. From the very beginning Dutthagamini and his supporters saw their struggle as a crusade meant to 'bring glory to the religion.' Monks accompanied the troops into battle because 'the sight of the monks is both a blessing and a protection for us.' They were encouraged to put aside their robes and join the fighting and several who were on the verge of becoming arahats did just that. Dutthagamini placed a relic of the Buddha in his spear and claimed that his struggle was not for his own advantage but for the promotion of the religion. However, he knew at least something about the Dhamma and after the war started to feel uneasy about all the blood he had shed. * Eight arahats assured him that he had made very little bad kamma because he had only killed passim, i.e. animals; nonbelievers being no more than animals.** Again, by any standards Dutthagamani's struggle would qualify as a religious war.

* According to the *Mahavamsa* Dutthagamani killed a million Tamils, which is certainly an exaggeration. However, it says something about the mentality of the Theravadin clerics that they inflated the number of people slaughtered rather than diminished it.

** The author of the *Mahavamsa* uses this pause in the narrative to make the usual plug for lavishing yet more wealth on the Sangha. After Duttagamini's scruples had been put to rest by the arahats he remembered that he had once eaten a single pepper without feeding the monks first. As a penance for this failing he built a huge stupa, a palatial monastery and then showered 'expensive gifts' on 190,000 monks and nuns.

The stories about Anawrahta and Dutthagamini are very well known in their respective countries and both monarchs are seen as great national and religious heroes. I have seen several temple wall paintings in Burma depicting Anawrahta's elephants carting the Tipitaka and other loot off to Pagan. Almost every Sinhalese knows the story of Duttagamani's exploits. On one side of the Buddha image at the Ruvanvalisaya, Sri Lanka's most sacred shrine, is a statue of Dutthagamani glaring at the Tamil king, who is on the other side. On the ceiling of the great cave temple at Dambulla is a painting of Dutthagamani shooting his bow and the dying Tamil king with the arrow

lodged deep in his heart. Having said all this it is also important to emphasize that Theravada, like other forms of Buddhism, has generally had a softening and civilizing effect on people and the wars that have been fought in its name pale into insignificance besides those of Christianity or Islam. I only wish to point out that plenty of blood has been shed in the name of Theravada. Likewise, there is as much blind faith, unthinking conformity, perfunctory religiosity and irrationality in Theravada as there is in other religions, probably more.

The greatest myth perpetuated by Theravada however, is the idea that monks are a race apart, a unique breed, a special class of beings so different from everyone else that they must be treated with extraordinary reverence. Thus when a monk walks into a room people start to whisper as if the sound of the ordinary human voice will somehow damage his ears. When people spoon food into his bowl they do it as if they are performing a delicate surgical operation. I find that when I visit Theravadin groups in the West that have had a Thai or Burmese monk prior to my coming that the word I hear more often than any other is 'sorry.' I ask if I can have a glass of water and someone immediately says 'Sorry bhante' and rushes off to get one. I walk towards the door and if someone is coming through it in the other direction they will say 'Sorry' and back away and let me pass. Unlike Theravadins, the Buddha had no illusions about unenlightened human beings including monks. In *Dhammapada* verse 307 he says, 'There are many uncontrolled men of evil character wearing the yellow robe.' But say such a thing in a Theravadin land or even suggest that most monks are not much different from other people and you will provoke shock, outrage and accusations of impiety.

Over a two year period Michael Mendelson perused the Rangoon newspapers for reports of monks involved in unseemly behavior. This was his findings. 'Two cases were reported of monks arrested for trafficking opium, two involving theft and refuge in the Sangha after misappropriation of large sums, one of kidnapping, a case of two monks in a pilgrimage racket designed to smuggle goods and foreign exchange to India, a report of a monk carrying medical supplies to insurgents and one example of a monk confidence man who tricked a school mistress out of a valuable ring…There were accounts of three monks involved in clandestine affairs with women, one resulting in a paternity charge, another culminating in a mortal assault on a boy and his companion who had gossiped about an older monk's affair with a young girl, and a third involving a trishawman's wife and a monk. For "embracing and kissing in a railway carriage" a monk and a girl were imprisoned for three months. Finally, I read of a monk who wounded his own abbot because the abbot had threatened him in order to gain the monk's sister in marriage. Violence between monks was reported on occasions. Three cases were noted of monks or novices attacking others in the monastery, often with apparent minor provocation: one from a school ragging, one from a quarrel over the possession of a book, and another from a derogatory note found during a Pali exam. An equal number of incidence of violence led to the death of someone in the monastery; in one incident, a novice, lightly reprimanded by the presiding monk, killed him with a dagger; in another, a monk was discovered dying in a pool of blood, and a missing colleague was sought; in a third, an abbot who had spent twenty-eight years in the Sangha turned himself in to a village headman after running amok in his monastery and killing one monk and badly wounding a companion… In addition, two cases of suicide were reported, one due to mental torment and conflict, another concerning a seventy-six-year-old *sayadaw* who thought it was time for him to leave the world, and an account was given of a monk hospitalized with acute stomach pains seemingly related to his agonies over his five children, whom he had left to join the Order.'

Mendelson also found numerous reports of fights between monks in the same monastery and between monks of different monasteries. In the 1960's Burmese monks were admittedly more rowdy and undisciplined than those in other Theravadin lands but incidents like these are commonly enough reported in the newspapers in those countries too. Despite this, it would be wrong to believe that all monks or even many monks are thugs and criminals. But the belief that most monks or even many monks are especially holy or that monasteries are places of profound sanctity, is equally

wrong. In fact, given that so many monks ordain due to poverty, custom or social expectation rather than conviction, that they are pampered, that they are always the centre of attention and that peoples' reverence for the robe means that they are unlikely to ever be reprimanded or pulled into line, it is surprising that the level of bad behavior is as low as it is. The reality is that most monks are completely ordinary human beings and that most monasteries completely ordinary human institutions. Despite this one of the core dogmas of Theravada and one that monks are very anxious to promote, is that the Sangha is 'an incomparable field of merit in the world' and that monks must be treated as if they are quasi-divine beings. It may have been like that at the time of the Buddha but it is not now and has not been so for many centuries.

## Sectarianism and Ethnocentricity

In all Theravadin countries the Sangha is split into different sects – two in Thailand, three in Sri Lanka and more than half a dozen in Burma. In Sri Lanka the Siam and Amarapura Nikayas are further split into so-called chapters. Each of these sects and chapters has a head who is supposed to have authority and jurisdiction over the monks below him but in actual fact have little real influence. The Sangharajas of Burma and Thailand have some power given to them by their governments but they rarely seem to exercise it except at the behest of the powers that be. Sri Lanka's Maha Nayakas are no more than figure heads and have no jurisdiction outside their own monasteries. So in actual fact there is not and has not been a Mahasangha for many centuries, virtually every monastery is an autonomous self-governing body. This independence could have certain advantages but the disadvantages far outweigh these. It makes it very difficult for reforms to be instituted, for discipline to be maintained, for miscreants to be corrected or expelled or for unified action on any matter to be taken. If the abbot is sincere and wise his monastery will probably be good, if he is not it won't be and there is little anyone can do about it. As pointed out before, the main factor governing monks and monasteries is not Dhamma or even Vinaya but long established tradition and these traditions usually owe more to feudalism and monarchism than they do to anything the Buddha taught.

There is no more unity between Theravadians in different countries than there is within them. The popular and outward expressions of Theravada in these lands are more pronounced than the similarities. Add to this the high degree of nationalism and ethnocentricity amongst Sri Lankans, Burmese and especially Thais and they only barely recognize each other as co-religionists. When King Chulalankhorn of Thailand visited the Shwedagon Pagoda in Burma in 1870 he marched right in with his shoes on. True, it was a Buddhist temple but it wasn't one of 'our temples' so it didn't really matter. The Burmese for their part were not too upset by the king's behavior. After all, he was not Burmese so he hardly qualified to be a Buddhist. Western monks living in Asia are treated with the greatest courtesy and kindness but they are rarely accepted as real monks or real Buddhists. To a Burmese you have to be Burmese to be a 'real' Buddhist, Thais think the same way, the Sri Lankans somewhat less so. Phra Peter says; 'It is a fact that a lot of Thai people don't seem to take me very seriously as a monk and I have heard other Phra Farang* say they have met with similar 'resistance.' Despite wearing the same robe, shaving my head and following the same rules as my Thai colleagues, I am still not a 'real' monk… When I have occasionally asked why I am not taken seriously, I am told; 'You are not Thai and you do not chant'. I point out gently that the Buddha was not Thai either and as far as I know, he didn't have a lot to say about the necessity or efficacy of chanting. It doesn't make any difference.' The situation is not dissimilar for Westerners going to temples in their own countries run by Thai monks or even by Western monks trained in Thailand. Long before they learn any Dhamma they find they have to adopt Thai etiquette, pronounce Pali with a Thai accent, sit in the Thai manner, bow in the Thai way; in short become a Thai clone. One gets the feeling that it would be more in keeping with their real attitude if the monks in such establishments wore Thai flags rather than yellow robes.

* Foreign monks in Thailand.

It is not at all surprising that when a Westerner ordains in Thailand people don't say 'He's becoming a monk', they say 'He's becoming a Thai.' I recently attended a ceremony conducted by some Burmese monks at which a number of Thai monks were present also. When the Burmese began their chanting the Thai's started smirking to each other. The Burmese style of chanting and pronouncing Pali differs somewhat from their own and so of course the Thais found it highly amusing. If a Theravadin center in the West run mainly by Westerners gets a Burmese monk Burmese people will suddenly start coming and giving generous support. If it then gets a Sri Lankan monk the Burmese will gradually disappear and the Sri Lankans who never came before will start coming in large numbers. Asian Theravadins in the West would much prefer a monk from their own country who does nothing than a monk from another county who is a competent teacher. A Sri Lankan monk in the UK told me an amusing and very characteristic story of something that had happened to him some years previously. A Burmese man had just arrived in London, came to the temple, expressed his enthusiastic desire to attend regularly during the time he would be staying in the city and then made a donation of fifty Pounds. Apparently that very afternoon he found out that there was a Burmese temple in London. The next day he came to the Sri Lankan temple, asked for his donation back and never came again. Theravadins of different countries are not hostile towards each other, it's just that they couldn't care less about what happens outside their own little domains. The World Fellowship of Buddhists was started in 1950 to try to rectify this situation but given the ethnocentricity of traditional Buddhism and its general apathy it has achieved almost nothing. Christmas Humphreys described WFB conferences as consisting of 'much talk about what should be done but little of who should do it, how and when.' The internationalism of ancient Buddhism long ago gave way to a narrow parochialism and consequently the solidarity and mutual support between Christians, Muslims or Jews for example, is almost nonexistent among Theravadins.

## The Yellow and the Purple

If a sociologist in 1960 was told that in fifty years hence Buddhism would have a significant presence in the West and he was then asked to guess which type of Buddhism would be most popular, I am certain he would have picked Theravada. He would have probably explained his choice by saying that Theravada is less ritualistic, more rational, that its essential text were available in translation and that its teachings were more in harmony with contemporary Western values and ideas. Further, he might have pointed out that countries like Sri Lanka and Burma were former British colonies where English was widely spoken making it easier for Westerner to go there to study and for monks from there to teach in the West. Our hypothetical sociologist would have been right in believing that the teachings in the Pali Tipitaka were like that but he would have been wide off the mark in assuming that Theravada was therefore like that too. And consequently he would have been completely wrong about which type of Buddhism would have become most popular. Because it is not Theravada but Tibetan Buddhism that has won wide acceptance from ordinary people as well as from academics and many public figures as well.

Why is it that despite being the last type of Buddhism to arrive in the West and being thoroughly feudal in some ways, Tibetan Buddhism has become so popular? The first and perhaps most obvious reason is what could be called the Shangri La factor. The air of romance and mystery that surrounds Tibet makes all things associated with it extremely attractive for many people. Related to this is what might be called the sympathy factor. Many informed people feel a deep sympathy for the plight of the Tibetan people and this can lead to an interest in their culture and religion. But while such things might account for an initial attraction to Tibetan Buddhism they are not enough to hold people's attention over time or to get them to commit themselves to it as a philosophy of life. Other factors are needed to explain Tibetan Buddhism's extraordinary popularity.

While Tibetan monks have a strong commitment to spirituality this does not prevent them from

appreciating the beautiful. Like Ch'an and Zen, Tibetan Buddhism has integrated both the creative impulse and the aesthetic sense into spiritual practice. A number of great meditation masters have also been poets, painters and sculptors. A Tibetan Buddhist has written 'Art and meditation are creative states of the human mind. Both are nourished by the same source, but it may seem that they are moving in different directions: art towards the realm of sense-impression, meditation towards the overcoming of forms and sense-impressions. But the difference pertains only to accidentals, not to essentials.' Theravadin cultures have produced great works of art but Theravadin scholars and meditation masters have long regarded all the fine arts - if they have thought about them at all - as little more than a sop to popular needs rather than expressions of spirituality or a means of awakening and nurturing it. According to the commentaries it is an offence for a monk to even touch a musical instrument. The Dambadeni Katikavata, drawn up after a reform of the Sangha in Sri Lanka in the 13th century tells monks that the literary and visual arts are 'despised branches of knowledge' which should be shunned.

The Theravadin position on art is epitomized by a famous story of Cittagutta from the *Visuddhimagga*. One day two young monks came to visit Cittagutta in the cave where he had lived for sixty years. One of the monks happened to notice the beautiful paintings on the roof and mentioned these to Cittagutta. The wizened old monk said that despite his long residence in the cave he had never raised his eyes to look at the paintings and in fact didn't even know they were there. The only reason he knew that there was a flowering tree at the mouth of his cave was because once a year he saw the fallen petals on the ground. In his *Refinement of the Arts*, David Hume tells of the Christian monk 'who because the window of his cell opened upon a noble prospect, made a covenant with his eyes never to turn that way.' This is exactly the sort of thing strict Theravadin monks do even today. Theravada sees the enlightened person as dead to beauty, indeed dead to every human feeling. The Buddha was able to listen to and enjoy Pancasikha's sitar playing (D.II,267) but a Theravadin monk could never do such a thing, not in public at least. He might get away with writing poetry, particular if it was about decrepitude, death or the worms that infest the bowels. But the idea of him painting, doing flower arranging or going to an art exhibition, a Shakespeare performance or a concert is unthinkable. The cultivation and appreciation of the arts in Tibetan Buddhism gives it a definite appeal to many people while Theravada has nothing to offer in this area other than the simplistic notion that beauty causes attachment.

Tibetan Buddhists can be fiercely sectarian, sometimes even more so than Theravadins. However, within each sect there is a high degree of unity and cohesion. Each has its leader and teachers who are looked up to and who decide general policy. Stronger centers in one country help weaker ones in another, they share teachers, cooperate with each other in charitable work, etc. The Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition for example, had more than eighty centers worldwide, it run numerous social service programs including schools, a prison project, clinics and hospices and has its own highly successful publishing company. The Foundation's several affiliated monasteries educate and train monks and nuns who are then sent to the different centers which in turn help support the monasteries. Members and friends around the world, and they amount to many thousands, are kept informed of the Foundation's activities through its magazine which is published in several languages. Theravada's 'every man for himself' attitude makes joint efforts like this very difficult and guarantee that most centers and groups in the West remain small and isolated. In the case of ethnic centers in the West (i.e., centers with Asian monks catering mainly to Asian expatriates) they are usually unable to work with each other due to personal jealousies, nikaya rivalries and in the case of Sri Lankan temples, caste antagonism.

Another thing that makes Tibetan Buddhism more attractive to Westerners than Theravada is that it has a richer contemplative tradition and more of its monks are experienced in meditation. I agree with Bhikkhu Bodhi when he says, 'The main reasons (Zen and Tibetan Buddhism) have gained in popularity over the Theravada is, I believe, because within their fold the lineage of meditation has been kept more alive than in mainstream Theravada… Rarely do (Theravadin monks in the West)

exhibit the same degree of spiritual vitality as the Mahayana and Vajrayana masters.' The majority of Theravadin monks know little or nothing of meditation beyond the theory and often not even that. The idea of hundreds of monasteries filled with thousands of monks diligently meditating every day is probably the biggest illusion Westerners have about Theravada in Asia. As far as Sri Lanka is concerned it might even be true to say that there is a distinct anti-meditation culture within much of the Sangha. Few monks meditate so one who does is immediately out of step with the majority. His practice is a continual reminder to the others that they are not doing what they are supposed to and quite naturally they resent this. The meditator will become the target of subtle jibes and snide comments. If he accidentally leaves his toothbrush in the bathroom someone is sure to say with a self-satisfied smile, 'Ah! Not very mindful today are we.' They will rarely miss the opportunity to put him down or disparage him. To make matters worse, the meditating monk will soon attract the admiration of the laity and they will come to the monastery asking to see him, bringing gifts for him and praising him. It won't be long before the other monks get jealous and start making the mediator's life decidedly uncomfortable. Eventually he will either go to live in an *arannya*, one of forest centers meant for such monks, or more likely just give up.

While rarely failing to commend meditation, at least when lay people are present, Sri Lankan monks actually believe that it is more suited to simple people, women and the elderly and evidence suggests that this attitude has prevailed for centuries. Walpola Rahula writes; 'Examples found in the commentaries show that almost all able and intelligent monks applied themselves to grantha-dhura (study) while elderly monks of weak intellect and feeble physique, particularly those who entered the Order in their old age, devoted themselves to vipassana-dhura (meditation).' Anthropologist Martin Southwold found that amongst the Sri Lankan lay people he interviewed meditation was a euphemism for sleeping and that many 'village Buddhists, especially men, and including some of the clergy, regard the practice with derision.' I know that at least some monks in Sri Lanka see meditation as having more a punitive than a spiritual value. In one monastery where I used to stay the abbot would punish the little monks when they misbehaved by making them 'do meditation;' he would force them sit in a meditation posture for an hour or two without moving. Not a few Sri Lankans monks have confided to me the embarrassment and discomfort they felt when they first got to the West and were asked to teach meditation. Some learn it as they go along, most just bluff their way through or avoid the subject and concentrate on explaining the basics of Buddhism. Meditation is more common in Burma than Sri Lanka and some Burmese monks coming to the West certainly have experience in meditation. Having said this though and while acknowledging their sincerity it would be difficult to imagine a more dry, impersonal, joyless and 'by numbers' approach to meditation than that offered by the Burmese.

The Pali suttas present meditation as a very experiential and experimental endeavor but rather than approaching them in this spirit or using them as guides to further practice Theravadins see them as the only and final word on the subject. To make matters worse, all suttas including those on meditation are interpreted through the Abhidhamma and the commentaries, which are strong on semantics and making meaningless distinctions but very weak on psychological insights. Meditation is usually understood only within the parameters of exactly defined numbered categories. Thus there are five Hindrances, not four or six, and they are always the same five. If one has problems with kammacchanda one does A, B or C as detailed in the commentary and if this doesn't work one simply tries harder until it does. This literalist attitude also means that Theravada meditation is usually technique based. All one has to do is find the right or 'pure' technique and adhere to it exactly and results will come. The same technique is taught to everyone no matter what their psychological state, their previous experience or problems they might have with the technique. You change to fit the technique not the other way around. The Buddha's common sense observation that the faculties of individuals are different (M.II,455) and the fact that he recommended a variety of techniques is too subtle an idea for most teachers to understand. Outside all these formulas, lists, steps and stages the meditation teacher has little to say. I met a man who had done sixteen meditation courses with a famous lay teacher and had experienced a particularly distressing

problem during every course. Each time he went to the teacher about his difficulty he was told exactly, word for word, the same thing; 'It's just samkharas coming up. Go back and continue the practice.' According to my informant no other advice or explanation was given. Asian Theravadin teachers are extremely reluctant to say anything beyond the text or deviate from the standard explanation or technique. A friend of mine once told me that while discussing piti with his teacher, an eminent Burmese master, he mentioned that he had once experienced great joy while watching a sunset. The teacher looked puzzled for a moment and then said, 'That's impossible,' by which he meant that such a thing is not mentioned in the *Visuddhimagga* and so it couldn't have happened. I am not suggesting that such literalism or lack of psychological insight is universal but it certainly is the norm.

Between 1966 and 1970 a famous debate was conducted through the pages of *World Buddhism* between Bhikkhu Kheminda of Sri Lanka and Nanuttara Sayadaw of Burma on the merits of the Mahasi technique.* The protagonists quoted from the suttas, the Abhidmamma, the commentaries, the sub-commentaries and the commentaries to the sub-commentaries, but never once throughout the whole debate did either party ever refer to their own meditation experience. As astonishing as this might seem it is quite in keeping with the usual understanding of meditation in Theravada. Meditation is about reduplicating within oneself exactly what the text say, or more correctly, the commentarial interpretation of what the text say; it is not about understanding one's experience. In Rod Bucknell's account of how he was instructed in vipassana he says; 'I had been taught how to *have* experiences rather than how to *observe* and *understand* them' (italics in original). My own experience is that the better Theravadin meditation teachers are competent in giving basic and mid-range meditation instruction but when it comes to specific psychological problems or the more subtle aspects of the path they have little to say that is helpful. There are exceptions to everything said above – Ajahn Chah and some of his disciples, the teachers from the Insight Meditation Society, Ashin Tejaniya and the late Godwin Samararatna being some who come to mind.

* When Mahasi Sayadaw's disciples introduced his meditation into Sri Lanka in the 1950's they met with fierce opposition. Sri Lankan monks were incensed that foreigners should presume to teach meditation on their turf. The notoriously acid-tongued Bhikkhu Kassapa of Vajirarama denigrated the Mahasi technique as 'bowel displacement meditation.'

If further evidence is needed for the richness of the Tibetan contemplative tradition and the poverty of its Theravadin equivalent, one only need look at the literature produced by each. Sri Lanka has been a Buddhist country for about two thousand two hundred years and yet did not produce any meditation manuals or practical works on meditation until the 20th century. The same is true of Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. This is truly astonishing when one think of the implications of it. The *Visuddhimagga* is sometimes thought of as a meditation manual but it clearly is not and was never meant to be. According to the *Mahavamsa* Buddhaghosa wrote the *Visuddhimagga* to demonstrate his orthodoxy, not to instruct meditators. The *Vimutthimagga* on the other hand is a practical manual based on Pali sources and may have been composed in Sri Lanka although this is by no means certain. But even those scholars who see it as a Sri Lankan work agree that it was not a product of the Theravadins but probably of the Abhayagirivasins. Buddhism did not really become firmly established in Tibet until the 11th century and since that time it has produced an extraordinary amount of literature on meditation. Some of these works are not just beautifully written but are also practical and not uncommonly show profound psychological and spiritual insights. Thus a good number of Tibetan teachers are able to offer a rich variety of meditative techniques, illustrate their talks with interesting antidotes and stories about past masters and speak confidently about the higher aspects of practice. Their general openness and flexibility also means that they are accommodating to some of the wisdom of contemporary psychology which helps them to present meditation in categories that Westerners are familiar with.

But it is when comparing teachers that the differences between Tibetan and Therevada Buddhism are most pronounced. The average Tibetan monk is friendly, accommodating and good humored.

The best example of this is the leader of the Tibetan people, the Dalai Lama. Despite being a former head of state, a senior monk, a scholar of great erudition and a Nobel laureate, this man not only describes himself as 'just a simple monk' but actually behaves like one. The general impression he gives is of a humble and unaffected individual and he is by no means the only Tibetan monk like this. Such behavior stems from a notion shared by Mahayana and Western culture and has worked to Tibetan Buddhism's advantage in the West. In both cultures the person who is high but makes themselves low is appreciated and such behavior is even seen as indicative of important spiritual qualities, as indeed it could well be. The West had derived such ideas from the Christian doctrine that while Jesus is the savior of humankind he is also its humble servant. Tibetans have got it from the Bodhisattva Ideal, the concept of putting aside one's own interests in order to benefit others. In Theravada by contrast, spiritual virtuosity is inextricably linked to social status and formality. A person who is superior (spiritually or otherwise) must act in a superior manner. He must always have a expression of lofty indifference on his face, always go first, always take the place of honor and always give the impression that this is no more than his due. To ask people not to bother about formalities or to return a greeting, to hug a child or indulge in good-natured self-deprecation as the Dalai Lama does, would be seen as proof that a monk was shallow and unworthy of respect. Thus Theravadin monks are usually stiff and aloof and many Westerners find this off-putting.

Some time ago I stayed with an eminent meditation teacher in Burma. On my arrival I went to his suite to pay my respects and found him sitting on a gilt teak throne surrounded by a large retinue of devotees, mainly rich matrons. It was a little like entering the court of a petty monarch. We had some connection to each other and I was interested to talk to him about it but he was uncommunicative and hardly acknowledged my presence. After my polite inquiries about his health etc met with no more than a few grunts I lapsed into an awkward silence and was eventually led out by an attendant who showed me to my room. Towards dusk I happened to see the teacher in the garden and decided to go and try to make contact again. He greeted warmly, asked me what I had been doing of late and we had an interesting exchange on the matter I had wanted to discuss with him. Why this apparent change? Because in front of the public he, like all sincere Theravadin monks, must present the facade of the arahat-like individual – controlled, unsmiling and indifferent – otherwise he would simply not be taken seriously. It is only when he is 'off duty' as it were, that he can relax and be himself. The naïve psychology of Theravada equates detachment with having a blank stare, never a smile. It is not relaxed self-confidence which is indicative of virtue but being inflexible about minor rules. Proof of meditational progress is not a heightened sensitivity and openness but sour withdrawal. This is what Theravadins believe an arahat to be like and so this is what they try to become, or at least to appear to be in front of their devotees. This control and suppression combined with the strain of continually pretending to be what they are not, robs Theravadin monks of the humanness and warmth that makes Tibetan monks so attractive. An American I know who practiced vipassana for years before becoming a Tibetan Buddhist once said to me, 'Being with a *rimpoche* is like sitting on a comfortable rug beside a warm fire. Being with a Theravadin meditation master is like sitting in a refrigerator with a tight corset on.' This is not always true but the point is well taken.

## A Case of Diarrhea

It is clear from the suttas that the most noticeable feature of the Buddha's personality was his warmth and compassion. This compassion was not just something the Buddha felt for others or that they felt in his presence, it was also the motive for much of what he said and did. He visited and comforted the sick 'out of compassion' (A.III,378), he taught the Dhamma 'out of compassion' (AIII,167). On one occasion he went into the forest looking for a serial killer because he had pity for the murderer's potential victims and also for the murderer himself. The Buddha's compassion seemed to transcend even the bounds of time. He is described sometimes as doing or refraining from doing certain things 'out of compassion for coming generations' (M.I,23). Once he said that his very reason for being was 'for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of

compassion for the world, for the welfare, the benefit and the happiness of gods and humans' (A.II,146).

The story of the Buddha and the sick monk is further evidence that the Buddha's kindness and compassion was not just a sentiment but an active force which expressed itself in behavior that made a positive difference to peoples lives. 'At that time a certain monk was suffering from diarrhea and lay where he had fallen in his own filth. The Lord and Ananda were visiting the lodgings, they came to where the sick monk lay and the Lord asked him; "Monk, what is wrong with you"? "I have diarrhea Lord". "Is there no one to look after you"? "No Lord". "Then why is it that the other monks do not look after you"? "It is because I am of no use to them, Lord". Then the Lord said to Ananda, "Go and fetch some water and we will wash this monk". So Ananda brought water and the Lord poured it out while Ananda washed the monk all over. Then taking the monk by the head and feet the Lord and Ananda together carried him and laid him on a bed. Later, the Lord called the other monks together and asked them; "Why, monks did you not look after that sick monk"? "Because he was of no use to us, Lord". Then the Lord said, "Monks, you have no mother and father to look after you. If you do not look after each other, who will? He who would nurse me, let him nurse the sick"' (Vin.IV,301).

This is well known incident in the life of the Buddha - at least today. But looking through the literature produced in Theravadin cultures over the last two thousand years - poems, biographies of the Buddha, anthologies of stories, hagiographies, guides to the monastic life, cosmological works etc. - I have been able to find only a single reference to it. I am very familiar with the sculpture wall paintings and sculptures of Thailand, Burma and Sri Lanka which illustrate the life of the Buddha but I have never seen this incident depicted. Mingun Sayadaw's monumental two thousand seven hundred page biography of the Buddha mentions almost every conceivable incident in his life - but not this one. The only appearance of this story that I know of in the traditional literature, sculpture or painting of Theravadin lands is in the *Saddhammopayana*, a 10th century poem from Sri Lanka. Verses 557 to 560 eulogize the Buddha's compassion in nursing the sick monk and urge the reader to follow his example. The poem even talks about protecting the helpless (v 307) rather than just helping monks and giving to others simply for the joy of giving ( v 324) rather than the usual calculating Theravadin notion of giving in order to get merit. These few words of heartfelt and practical kindness make the *Saddhammopayana* almost unique in the literature of Theravadin lands.* There must be an explanation for this anomaly and one does not have to look far to find it. According to scholars, the *Saddhammopayana* was composed by a monk of the Abhayagirivasins, a sect that the Theravadins derided as heretics and dismissed as Mahayanists. So although the *Saddhammopayana* draws on material from the Pali Tipitaka it is not a Theravadin work. Why has the wonderful story of the Buddha and the sick monk – so human, so indicative of loving-kindness and compassion, so worthy of being held up as an example to be emulated – received almost no attention in Theravada?

*Alaungsithu's beautiful Shwegugyi Hymn written in 1131 and the prayer composed by a lady of the court of King Narasihapati in 1266 would be two very rare examples of Theravadin literature expressing genuine unselfish concern and love for others. Predictably, both works remain in obscurity. Luce is probably right in suggesting that they both reflect the 'lingering influence of Mahayana.'

## Anathapindika and Asoka

The Buddha's most important lay disciple was a rich banker and merchant of Savatthi named Sudatta. Although this was his real name he was usually called Anathapindika, a nick-name meaning 'feeder of the poor.' He was called this because of the generous material help he gave to the destitute and homeless in Savatthi and presumably he had done much for them, more than was usual, otherwise he would have never earned the appellation. Of course Anathapindika was also very generous to the Sangha. The Theravada commentaries frequently mention and praise his gifts

to the monks, supposedly a hundred and eighty million in gold, but nowhere do they record any stories about the help he gave to the poor. The ancient Theravadins apparently pruned Anathapindika's biography thereby turning him from a Buddhist with a social conscious into a good Theravadin whose main concern was to lavish wealth on the Sangha.

If Anathapindika is the archetypal Theravadin lay man then Asoka is the archetypal Theravadin monarch. But this statement needs to be qualified because there are in fact two King Asokas – the Asoka of history and the Asoka of the Theravada tradition. The Asoka of history is now well known to anyone acquainted with Buddhist or Indian history. Shocked at the suffering caused by his expansionist policies he renounced war and tried to govern his empire using Buddhist principles. He built hospitals, sponsored the cultivation of medical plants, established nature reserves, promoted religious tolerance and humanized the administrative and judicial systems. But the Asoka of history, the real Asoka, was unknown until his numerous edicts were deciphered and translated in the 19th century. Prior to this the only Asoka known to Theravadins was the Asoka of the tradition whose life and deeds are told in the *Mahavamsa*, the *Dipavamsa*, the *Samantapasadika* and several other works. And what a different Asoka this one is! Astonishingly, Theravadin literature makes no mention at all of Asoka's welfare work, his paternal concern for his subjects, his vision for a spiritual society or even of his dramatic conversion. The traditional Asoka is portrayed as a good Theravadin lay man, that is, one who spends his time waiting on the monks and who lavishes all his wealth on them. The *Mahavamsa* says; 'He fed 60,000 monks regularly in his palace. He had very costly hard and soft food prepared, decorated the city, brought the monks to his palace, fed them, and presented them with the requisites.' Then we are told that he gave over 9000,000,000 in cash to build monasteries, stupas and to feed yet more monks. But there is no mention whatsoever of him doing any good to anyone other than to monks. Once again, in the hands of Theravadin editors, a remarkable man who genuinely cared about the spiritual, moral and material welfare of humankind was revised and edited into one who did nothing for anybody except the monks. This has been the norm throughout Theravadin history – all the best social virtues are highjacked by and diverted towards the Sangha.

## Slaves of the Sangha

Vinaya formalism and clericocentricity have had considerable influence in retarding social compassion and consequently social reform in Theravadin countries. The practice of slavery is a good example of this. The Buddha said that the buying and selling of human beings is a wrong means of livelihood (A.III,207), and monks were not allowed to accept gifts of slaves either (D.I,5). This disapproval continued at least until the time of the compiling of the Vinaya which also forbids monks from owning slaves. And yet we know from history that the Sangha was a slave owning institution for centuries. The well-known Galapata inscription from 12th century Sri Lanka mentions a gift of ninety slaves to a monastery so they could 'serve their lordships.' Getting around an inconvenient rule like the one against owning slaves was child's play for Theravadins. In the commentary to the *Majjhima Nikaya* Buddhaghosa explains exactly how to do it. When someone comes to your monastery to offer you a slave simply refer to the slave as 'a servant' and say 'I accept this servant.' This is a good example of the 'juggling definitions' stratagem recommended by Thanissaro. During one period in Sri Lankan history it came to be considered meritorious to liberate slaves, as indeed it would be. This is one of many examples throughout Theravadin history where, periodically at least, some monks and lay people genuinely tried to practice the spirit of the Dhamma and apply it in the social domain. Sadly, it is also a good example of what usually happened to such efforts. The monks' demand for attention and pampering and their constant preaching about making merit by giving to them meant that by the 5th century this humane practice had degenerated into a mere game.

This is what would happen. A wealthy man would offer his wives or children to the monks as 'slaves,' they would spend the day in the monastery waiting on the monks and then in the evening

the man would pay the monks to redeem them. The wife and children got merit by serving the monks, the man got merit from both offering and liberating the 'slaves' and the monastery got the ransom money. Probably the only ones who were not happy were the real slaves who had to stay back to clean up after these games were over. For about two hundred years this sort of thing become something of a fashion and records show that monasteries earned a good income from it. Meanwhile the impetus to free real slaves petered out. In Sri Lanka, Laos and Cambodia monasteries owned slaves and slavery existed until abolished by the colonial powers in the 19$^{th}$ century. The same was true of Burma where so-called 'pagoda slaves' were very numerous and formed a heredity underclass. Thailand's King Chulalankhorn abolished slavery at the end of the 19$^{th}$ century, not to conform with the spirit of the Dhamma or in response to guidance from the Sangha, but because of pressure from Christian missionaries and Western powers.* As with so many social evils the monks rarely lifted their voices or used their very considerable influence to protest cruelty or out of sympathy for the unfortunate. Theravadin apologists will say that monks are not meant to get involved in social issues. But as history shows, they were quite willing to get involved in slavery when it suited them even though it was against the spirit of the Dhamma and the specific injunctions of the Buddha. Many similar examples of this sort of thing could be given.

* Although the making of new slaves was prohibited in 1887 those already in bondage were not finally liberated until 1911 and some of these were attached to monasteries. The Military Service Act of 1905, for example, exempted slaves of the Sangha from national service.

## Sarvodaya

In the 1970's and 80's an organization called Sarvodaya became prominent in Sri Lanka and attracted much attention in the West. Supposedly based on Theravadin and Gandhian principals Sarvodaya ran numerous development programs in rural areas throughout Sri Lanka. The organization's founder A.T.Aryaratna took Pali words like dana and coined new terms like *shramadana*, 'the gift of labor,' in an attempt to give his concepts a Theravadin feel. Numerous books and articles have been written portraying Sarvodaya as a authentic Theravadin and home grown model of development rather than one derived from Western concepts. The truth is rather different. One of Sarvodaya's goals was to try to get monks involved in village development. This met with lukewarm results. Eventually at considerable expense a Sarvodaya Training Institute was established with the purpose of training such monks for this role but it soon had problems with recruitment or even with keeping or motivating the few monks who did come forward and eventually it closed down. Gombrich and Obeyesekere have given their reasons for this failure. Most young monks were just waiting to finish their education before disrobing; they were not really interested in long term commitment; some were not suited for social work; others were aware of public disapproval of monks doing social work.* I would agree with this assessment but I think it is only part of the story. After all, Sarvodaya not only failed to awaken the monk's social compassion in a focused and sustained way, it failed to motivate it in lay people too.

*For Ven. H. Gnanasiha's unflattering assessment of Sarvodaya monks see D. Kantowaky, *Sarvodaya - The Other Development*, pp. 125-130.

In Joanna Macy's glowing and idealized account of Sarvodaya she claims that monks have been known to do hard physical labor. I find this highly unlikely. The times I participated in Sarvodaya activities the other monks did little more than give short pep talks and stand on the sidelines making suggestions. As for the work itself it seemed symbolic rather than planned to make a lasting difference to the village and even this was constantly interrupted while the needs of the monks were catered to; 'Would Venerable like a glass of water?' 'Sit here Venerable so you don't get your robe dirty,' 'Venerable, it's nearly time for your dana,' In the late 1980's after Western donors decided to withdraw financial support from Sarvodaya so that could no longer pay full time workers, it very quickly became dormant and to the best of my knowledge has remained so since. While I think this

is a tragedy I also think it was inevitable. Sarvodaya's aims and principles have no basis in Theravadin doctrine, they have no forerunner in Theravadin history and therefore they never went deep in the hearts or minds of either monks or lay people. As soon as the salaried workers went the projects stopped. One must have the highest respect for Ariyaratna's determined and genuine efforts to try to make Theravada more socially relevant and in a Mahayana country he might have succeeded. But his whole vision was so at odds with everything Theravadian that it never had a chance. And of course Sarvodaya is not the first such effort to wither under the dead hand of Theravada orthodoxy and clerical inertia.

The Mahabodhi Society was started with both a Buddhist missionary and a social service agenda in 1893 by the Westernized and Christian-influenced Anagarika Dharmapala. Generously financed by an American patron* the society was able to build dispensaries, orphanages, vocational training and industrial schools and a seminary. But Dharmapala had constant difficulties trying to find dedicated monks to run them and by the 1940's most of the social and educational work had withered away. Today, other than commemorating past achievements, providing accommodation for Sri Lankan pilgrims in India and fighting court cases the Mahabodhi Society does almost nothing. The Gramasamvaradhana Movement in Sri Lanka in the 1930's had a similar history. Its initial success was due to a few exceptional monks but it too soon floundered.

* Dharmapala was always complaining that he could never get financial support from Buddhists.

Even when given state support and encouragement Theravadin monks seem incapable of sustained interest or commitment. In the 1960's the Thai government launched the Thammacharik Program with the goal of bringing the country's hill tribes into the mainstream of society. Monks were given training and the resources needed to go into remote areas to teach Buddhism. The reports on the progress of the Program make interesting reading. The monks' idea of spreading the Dhamma consisted, as one would expect, of teaching the tribes people how to bow to them properly, how to offer food in the right way and to chant the Metta Sutta for them. They didn't learn the language, they were not interested in making a long term commitment, they avoided hardship or inconvenience, they were not prepared to compromise on their rules and the locals were expected to change their norms to suit the monks, not the other way around. The Thammacharik Program was a failure as far as spreading Buddhism was concerned and was eventually abandoned. Christian missionaries soon moved in with their schools, basic health services and agricultural training programs etc. and today a large number of Thailand's hill tribes are Christian. It is true however; that in recent times more monks and lay people have began expressing compassion through good works. This is a very encouraging sign but it is still in its infancy and still involves a small number of people. As soon as one says this to Western Theravadins they will immediately start reciting the names of well known Theravadin individuals or organizations that are doing something for others. But such efforts are well known precisely because they are so exceptional.

## The Two Prostitutes

Once I was staying in a Sri Lankan Buddhist center in the West. One day in response to the bell I opened the door and invited the two woman who stood there to come in. As soon as they entered I realized from the way they were dressed and made up that they were both probably prostitutes. I felt a bit uneasy but they were already inside so I led them into the sitting room. They told me about themselves and as they did I began to feel somewhat ashamed of my initial reaction to them. Both had been pushed into prostitution by addiction to heroin and now after nearly ten years on the streets they were struggling to free themselves from its grip. One was soon to go into a drug rehabilitation program and the other was on the waiting list at the same place. They told me that they hoped Buddhism might help them recover their dignity and freedom and they wanted to know something about the Dhamma. I gave them my full attention, answered their questions, tried to encourage them and told them that they were welcome to come to see me at any time and that I

would be happy to visit them at the rehabilitation center. Half way through our talk the bell went again and I got up to open the door. It was three little old Sri Lankan ladies who had come to bring my dana. As usual they were all smiles and bows - until they saw my visitors. They could hardly disguise their disapproval. Being alone with a female was bad enough, but this! And any Theravadin would react in the same way. They simply could not conceive that a monk might be counseling a desperate soul or be discussing Dhamma with someone who just happened dropped in. The idea that a monk might have some integrity or principles unless he is being watched like a hawk is equally unthinkable.

Before the two woman left I gave them some incense and some books on Buddhism and one of them began to cry, in fact she sobbed. Through her tears she told me that before she and her friend had rung the bell they had hesitated because they didn't know what sort of reception they would get. She thanked me and told me how moved she was by my modest gift. 'Ordinary people generally don't like to have anything to do with us,' she said. I was happy to have been able to have done at least something for these two poor women but I knew I was in trouble. That evening two Sri Lankan lay men from the society's committee came to see me about this incident. They accepted my explanation but told me that under no circumstances could I ever invite a female into the center again unless there was someone else there. People might 'get the wrong idea,' It didn't 'look good.' And besides, 'you are not supposed to help people, you are supposed to follow the Vinaya.' And sadly they were quite right. For a Theravadian monk, humoring parochial minds, looking good on the outside and following petty rules must always come before the immediate needs of those in distress. I never saw the two prostitutes again although I thought about them from time to time. My only hope is that if they pursued their interest in the Dhamma that they went to a Tibetan or Zen center where they might have at least some chance of a getting sympathy and support.

**The Good Samaritan and the Good Theravadin**

A man once asked Jesus what he must do to be saved and Jesus asked him what the scriptures said. The man quoted the two Bible verse 'Love your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength and all your mind' and 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Jesus agreed with this and then the man asked him another question; 'Who is your neighbor?' In response to this question Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. 'Once a man was going on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho when robbers attacked him, stripped him and beat him up leaving him half dead. It so happened that a priest was going along that same way but when he saw the man he walked by on the other side of the road. Then a Levite also came along, went over and looked at the man and then walked passed on the other side of the road. But a Samaritan who was traveling that way came upon the man and when he saw him his heart was filled with pity. He went over to him, poured oil and wine on his wounds and bandaged them; then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn where he took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. "Take care of him", he told the inn keeper "and when I come back this way I will pay you whatever else you spend on him". Jesus then asked the man which of the three had acted like a neighbor to the man attacked by the robbers. "The one who had been kind to him" replied the man. Jesus said "Then go and act like this." '

This parable of Jesus and his words 'Insomuch as you did it for the least of these my brothers, you did it for me' (Mathew 25,34-40), have had a profound and positive effect on Christianity. The story of the Buddha nursing the sick monk and his exhortation 'He who would nurse me, let him nurse the sick,' so similar to Jesus' words, have had no corresponding influence on Theravadin thought or practice. They have been like a symphony played to the deaf. A Theravadin version of the parable of the Good Samaritan would go something like this. Once a man was going along the road from Bangkok to Ayudhya when robbers attacked him, stripped him and beat him up leaving him half dead. It so happened that a monk was going along the road, saw the man and thought to himself. 'I better not do anything because I might break the Vinaya and besides, if I don't hurry I'll

be late for dana' and he continued on his way. Next a meditator came along, saw the man and putting his palms together and smiling said, 'May you be well and happy' and then he continued mindfully on his way. Finally a pious old woman came along, saw the man and thought, 'Now if I help him I'll get ten points of merit but if go and serve the monks I'll get a thousand times more,' and she scurried off to the local monastery.

I have sometimes met young monks in Sri Lanka who would genuinely like to express metta or karuna through action but they find it extremely difficult. Lay people are always watching to make sure monks conform to traditional patterns of behavior and are quick to show disapproval when they don't. The notion of monks as precious, revered individuals is a further hindrance to such efforts. If a Sri Lankan monk tried to wash a sick man half a dozen horrified people would rush up saying, 'Ill do that for you Venerable Sir.' 'No Venerable, leave that to me.' They would snatch the soap and towel from his hand , lead him away to a comfortable chair while one would rush to get him a glass of water another would stand on the side fanning him and asking him whether he'd had his dana. If a Thai or a Burmese monk were ever stupid enough to try such a thing he would be branded 'a bad monk' and probably have to leave the district, perhaps even disrobed. And the idea of a monk nursing a sick female, even his sister, a baby girl or an old woman, even in an emergency, is utterly inconceivable. During the London blitz the well-known Burmese monk U Thittila, always a bit of a maverick, put on a helmet and trench coat and helped rescue people from bombed buildings. This won him much respect from British Buddhists but the severest condemnation in Burma and it took years for his reputation to recover. I met him just before his death and asked him about this incident. He chuckled and said; 'We Burmese wouldn't know karuna if we tripped over it' or words to that effect. Theravada must be the only religion in the world where a spontaneous act of kindness by a clergyman could be considered an offence.

In Sri Lanka and Thailand social work by monks is a little more acceptable than in Burma as long as the monk restricts himself to administration, fund raising or organizing the lay people and does not actually physically exert himself or get his hands dirty. But even then he will be struggling to get much encouragement or support from the community. Commenting on the Burmese situation Spiro says. '(O)ne group (of monks), concerned with performing acts of charity, have established orphanages in their monasteries... By 1962 there were 77 orphanages, scattered throughout Burma and the Shan States, affiliated with their monasteries, with more than 600 resident (male) orphans. As might be expected however... little interest has been shown in its work, either by other monks or by the laity. Financial support for its activities was mainly provided by the (American) Asia Foundation until its expulsion from Burma in 1962. Indeed one of the moving spirits of the work of these monks and in the founding of their association, was a Burmese employee of the latter foundation, a western educated Buddhist who, exposed to and influenced by Christian missionary work, was obviously trying to cast the Buddhist monks in the latter mold.' This is an astute observation. The funds for the little Theravadin social work that does exist often comes from beyond the community and such social work is usually done by either Western or Christian influences individuals, is in imitation of Christian social work or is done to counter the social work Christians do. * This is better than nothing but it is further evidence that practical compassion is not really a part of Theravada.

* For more on this syndrome see H. L. Seniviratna, *The Work of Kings*, 1999, p.319.

This is not to say that Theravadins are not kind and generous. They are, sometimes noticeably so. But their kindness and generosity is extended to the unfortunate only in a piecemeal and individual manner. A lay person will throw a few coins to a homeless man but he or she would rarely do anything about homelessness itself. Sustained and effective service is reserved almost entirely for the Sangha. Monks for their part can be equally kind but the Vinaya and public expectations prevent them from doing anything much more than just feeling kindness. Mendelson's comments on Burma are applicable to other Theravadin lands; 'Despite the occasional acts of social service customary

for monasteries in royal Burma, the feeling has always been in that country that the principle aim of monks should be their own search for enlightenment and that they should not be distracted from this by any worldly pursuits albeit of the most charitable kind. Thus, acts of social service are not traditionally performed as a matter of course or in consonance with any Buddhist theory on the subject, but rather are the natural outcome of usually good and ethically minded Burmans…It was already apparent to me, before going to Burma, that the whole nature of Burmese society might well be changed if Burmese changed their views about what actions constituted meritorious deeds. Overwhelmingly, these have consisted of gifts to the Sangha, primarily of food but also of buildings and various facilities and basic requirements.'

Theravadins will say that I am judging them by Christian standards and that monks were meant to be contemplatives not social workers. This is true and I have no argument with it. But there are two false assumptions behind this statement. Firstly, the reality is that the vast majority of monks in Theravadin countries *are not contemplative*. At best they are scholars and ritual specialists, at worst they are…well, we won't go into that again! Secondly, the notion that social service is somehow incompatible with meditation or even detrimental to it, is invalid. Social involvement could be a contemplation - it could be an exercise in letting go, a way of seeing and diminishing the ego, a means of developing metta and karuna. Take mindfulness practice for example. In the Satipatthana Sutta the Buddha says. 'Further, a monk is one who acts with mindfulness while coming and going, while looking in front and looking behind, while reaching out with his arm or drawing back his arm, while putting on his robe or caring his robe and bowl, while eating and drinking, supping and tasting, while defecating and urinating, while walking or standing, falling asleep or waking up, while talking or remaining silent' (M.I,57). The point being made here is that any activity can and should be done with mindfulness. Instead of using adherence to sterile and arcane rules as a means of developing mindfulness, as Thanissaro and other fundamentalists suggest, why not use helpfulness to others? If one can eat mindfully during a meditation course why can't one mindfully prepare food for the hungry? Then there is that old Theravadin favorite, the contemplation on the repulsiveness of the body. If one can become detached and calm by thinking of the unpleasant aspects of the body, why can't one do the same thing while caring for a terminally ill patient? The pedantic and conservative attitude of Theravada has retarded the development of such creative approaches to spirituality. Add to this the narcissistic self-preoccupation of Theravada and its clericocentrisity and such possibilities have never even been considered.

In 2000 I spent some time as a volunteer at Mother Theresa's Home For the Destitute Dying in Calcutta. The whole experience was an eye-opener for me. The first thing I noticed was that despite the toil, the misery and the not infrequent pressure, many of the sisters and other volunteers possessed the very qualities that we Buddhists try to develop through meditation – acceptance, detachment, contentment, as well as compassion and love. Their work was a way of helping others, a means of personal transformation and an offering to their God. It seems to me that this very idea is suggested in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta. In the hours before the Buddha's passing Ananda went to the lodgings, leant against the door post and sobbed at the thought that soon he would see his beloved friend and teacher no more. The Buddha noticed his faithful attendant's absences, asked where he was and on being told, called for him to come. Ananda came as requested and sat near the Buddha. 'Enough Ananda, do not weep or cry', said the Buddha. 'Have I not already told you that all things that are pleasant and liked are also ephemeral, subject to change and impermanent? For a long time, Ananda, you have been in the Tathagata's presence expressing love with body, expressing love with speech, expressing love with mind, beneficially, blessedly, whole-heartedly, unstintingly. You have achieved much good, Ananda. Make a last effort and in a short time you will be freed from the defilements' (D.II,144). What does the phrase 'expressing love through body' (mettena kaya kamena) mean here? Surely the Buddha was saying that Ananda's years of selfless giving, of quiet helpfulness and of thinking of others and putting them before himself, had allowed him draw near the portals of Nirvana. Surely Ananda's loving actions *were* his meditation.

The other thing I noticed about working in the Home for the Destitute Dying was that every night when I went back to my room my mind was for the most part cleansed of and free from the Hindrances, particularly kammacchanda. Despite being physically tired my mind was as lucid as when I had been doing long periods of solitary meditation. This was so noticeable that I began to wonder what could have caused it. As I had spent most of the day wiping up feces and washing infected wounds I am certain that it was because I had in effect been doing the contemplation on the repulsiveness of the body. Once, over a period of twelve months, I had done this contemplation formally, visiting the morgue at Kandy General Hospital once a week and found that it brought about a very deep stable detachment. But the detachment and clarity I experienced in Calcutta was qualitatively different, it was imbued with the joy and warmth of knowing that I had made at least some difference to the life of a fellow human being. I have often tried to logically work out the apparent paradox of being detached and yet caring about others. In Calcutta I didn't work it out logically but I did learn from my experience that the two can occur simultaneously. A Western Tibetan monk who runs a hospice has told me he has had this same experience. As an aside, the other thing I noticed about working in Calcutta was the difference between the lifestyle of the nuns and my own. While 'technically' having few possessions, I like other Theravadin monks, actually own or have the use of a cornucopia of things. The Little Sisters of Charity own nothing but two saris and a bucket. They spend all their time giving while we Theravadin monks spend most of our time receiving - and I think we are the poorer because of it.

## Cheng Yen and Tzu Chi

In 1966 a Taiwanese Buddhist nun named Cheng Yen witnessed a critically ill woman being refused admission to a hospital because she was too poor to pay the bills. A Theravadin would have taken this as a reminder to strive to get out of samsara as soon as possible. In keeping with her Mahayana background Cheng Yen decided to do what she could so that such a terrible thing did not happen again and thus the Tzu Chi Society came into being. Today Tzu Chi has over a hundred centers around the world. They have a large and effective wing to respond to disasters around the globe and their recycling project is a model of its kind. Not surprisingly Ven Cheng Yen and her work has inspired hundreds of thousands of people and has helped to bring about something of a revival of Buddhism in Taiwan. In 1995 I had the privilege of meeting Ven Cheng Yen herself. After having visited her impressive hospital in Hualien and several of her others centers and knowing of the enormous amount of work she does, I expected to see a dynamic, busy-looking woman, brisk in manner and with little time to talk. What a surprise then when I was introduced to a gently smiling nun who looked for all the world like a frail little bird. She is one of the most serene people I have ever met. Her movements were poised and mindful, she gave herself fully while we talked and she positively radiated compassion. And of course her compassion hasn't just transformed *her*, it has changed the lives of thousands of others as well. She is living proof that social concern need not be a hindrance to meditation or spiritual development.

I knew Hinatiyana Dhammaloka intimately in the three years before his death in 1981 and he was perhaps the most spiritually advanced Sri Lankan monks I have encountered. Mellow, wise and without ego he was a rare example of a mettacetovimutthi. It seems that far from hindering him, his work for the Gramasamvaradhana Movement in the 1930's and his subsequent social involvement had served as a basis for his later very palpable spiritual attainments. But most Theravadins just don't get it. They can only think of meditation as sitting with crossed legs, of love as a mental exercise you do for your own advantage and of generosity as giving to monks.

## The Loss of Love

H.B.Aronson's book *Love and Sympathy in Theravada Buddhism* brings together almost every reference to love, compassion, pity, sympathy, empathy and kindness in the Pali Tipitaka and its commentaries. It is a well researched and thorough book and makes interesting reading in that it

unintentionally shows just how deficient the understanding of love is in Theravada. Let us have a look at Aronson's findings. One of the Buddha's more significant discourses on love, with important implications for its practical expression, is the Desaka Sutta.* In this discourse the Buddha says 'Monks, one who protects themselves protects others and one who protects others protects themselves. How does one who protects themselves protect others? By repeated and frequently practicing meditation. And how does one who protects others protect themselves? By patience, harmlessness, love and nurturing care' (S.V,169). If ever there was a saying of the Buddha more worthy of being elaborated upon and beckoning to have its implications more deeply explored and applied, then surely this would be it. And yet in his commentary on this discourse Buddhaghosa says that protecting others refers to attaining the first three jhanas for oneself. He has nothing else to say on this matter.

* Nyanaponika correctly describes the Desaka Sutta as being 'hidden like a buried treasure, unknown and unused.' It is yet another example of an important discourse that has been given no significance in Theravada.

As we saw earlier, in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta the Buddha praises Ananda for practicing 'love through body.' Again, it is instructive to see how Buddhaghosa understands this phrase. This is his definition of loving actions as translated by Aronson. 'Loving physical activities are physical activities done with a loving mind...These are prescribed to monks in the text but householders may perform them as well. When monks, motivated by a loving mind, maintain proper conduct, this is called their loving physical activities. When householders go to the reliquary or to the Bodhi Tree for the sake of veneration, go to extend an invitation to the monks, go to meet the monks when they enter the village to collect alms, take their bowl, point out a seat for them, or accompany them and so forth, these are called loving physical activities.' So we see that the only way Buddhaghosa can suggest for a lay person to express love through the body is to worship an old bone or a tree and of course to serve monks. As for the monks themselves the best way they can express love through the body is to follow the Vinaya meticulously. In the two thousand years of reading the Buddha's words, contemplating them, analyzing them and elaborating upon them this is the best Theravada has been able to come up with. It is a very sorry picture indeed and goes a long way to explaining why genuine love and compassion are so uncharacteristic of Theravada.

About half way through Aronson's book (p. 64) he notices that despite the frequent use of the words love and compassion in the material he is studying, that there is no mention of actually doing anything which most people would think of as being benevolent or loving. Struggling to explain this lacuna he says; '...it can be assumed that the cultivation of these attitudes (i.e. the brahma viharas ) would effect the nature and scope of a meditator's manifest fraternal activity. A practitioner developing concentrated universal love or compassion would be deeply moved to help a wide range of individuals, without exception.' But can this really be assumed? The commentaries certainly do not assume it, throughout thousands of pages they never mention it, they don't even imply it. There are long technical definitions of metta and karuna, complex discussions about what level of absorption they are supposed to give access to and detailed instructions of how to practice metta as a formal meditation. There are numerous references to serving monks, feeding them and worshiping them and stories about devotees who sold their children into slavery so that they could buy gifts for monks. But Aronson can find no place in the more than four thousand pages of the Theravada commentaries where hospitality to strangers, feeding the hungry, protecting widows and orphans, caring for the sick, comforting the grieving or similar things are cites as examples of love or compassion or as the outcome of practicing them.

But this is all from the 5$^{th}$ century CE. Perhaps Theravada theory and practice has moved on a little since then. So let us have a look at *Brahmavihara Dhamma*, a modern exposition of love and compassion by Mahasi Sayadaw, probably the most famous and influential Theravadin master of the last century. Nowhere throughout his long treaties does the author suggest that acting kindly could help to develop love or compassion and in only two places does he suggest that giving others

practical help could be a manifestation of love or compassion. In the first of these he praises a Burmese man he knew of who used to feed stray dogs and in the second, on page 192, he briefly discusses nursing the sick. This however, is followed by a long paragraph where the reader is warned that helping the unfortunate may cause you to worry about them, lose sleep or even to 'suffer stiffness of the limbs.' To drive home the message that getting off your meditation cushion to help someone can be detrimental to your mundane and spiritual welfare Mahasi recounts a dramatic incident from real life. I quote; 'At one time, a medical doctor was said to have suffered from gastric ulcer from being fully occupied in attending the sick which had caused him to miss his regular meals. He died of that stomach disease while still young. Hence karuna, pity or compassion, can prevent one's own happiness. This is indeed true.' Such is the measly calculating selfishness that passes for compassion according to Theravada's greatest contemporary master.*

* This book also contains a marvelous example of the Theravadin mania for reductionism. Mahasi succeeds in subdividing compassion into one hundred and thirty two different types while saying absolutely nothing meaningful about any of them; see pp. 201-5.

During a recent teaching tour of Malaysia and Singapore I found sixteen books on metta bhavana circulating within the Theravadin community either for sale or for free distribution. None of these books referred to metta as anything beyond radiating kind thoughts or wishes. None of them described metta positively as a force for good but only negatively as an antidote to hatred. All of them referred to the usual standard list of the eleven benefits the mediator will get from doing metta bhavana while none of them discussed the benefits one could confer on others by being loving towards them. The best of these books, by Venerable Visuddhacara, is thoughtfully written and practical. On the back cover of this book is a quotation from Henry Van Dyke which says 'Love is not getting but giving.' Love is certainly more than just giving but most people would agree that giving is an important aspect of love. To give one's time, material things, a helping hand, encouragement, a shoulder to cry on, etc, could all be expressions of a loving heart. However, other than giving kind thoughts Visuddhacara neglects to mention any other type of giving or sharing in his book. Further, like all the other publications, this book has a section discussing the benefits that you *get* from practicing metta but fails to mention the benefits you can *give* to others by having metta towards them.

I will discuss one other contemporary publication to illustrate how love is understood in Theravada, the *Bhavana Magazine*, the organ of the Bhavana Society in the USA. Venerable Henapola Gunaratana, an open, active and spiritually insightful Theravadin monk, directs this society. Ven. Gunaratana has lived in the West for many years, most of his students are Westerners and he could be expected to take a more creative and modern approach to Theravada. The Autumn 2001 issue of the *Bhavana Magazine* was dedicated to the subject of metta. In the editorial the reader is told that all the articles in this issue will deal with 'the relationship between sitting and acting, between ourselves and all living beings.' This sounds very promising. As we read on we find that the articles have nice names like 'Cultivating the Heart,' and 'The Dance Of Love and Wisdom' and that there are numerous phrases like 'embracing others with metta,' 'relaxing in its radiance' and 'making peace with our shortcomings.' This sounds far less promising. In modern Theravadin discourse on metta this sort of effuse syrupy language is often a substitute for clear guidance and encouragement to go beyond just sitting to do something practical for those in need, to express metta through acts of kindness or to develop it by reaching out and helping others. And sadly, so it is with the *Bhavana Magazine*. Despite the promise in the editorial and the claim that 'metta is not something we do sitting on a cushion in one place, thinking, thinking, thinking' there is no mention throughout the whole magazine of doing anything apart from this. On page 16 Ven. Gunaratana addresses an open letter to his readers on the subject of the recent terrorist bombing in New York. He says; 'We request that all out friends and members of the Buddhist community send their loving-friendly thoughts of healing to all who suffer the loss of their friends and relatives and to all who suffer bodily and psychological pain.' He doesn't suggest doing anything beyond this, for example,

making a donation to the fund set up to help the families of the victims. As is the norm in Theravada, thinking kind thoughts while sitting on a pillow *is* sufficient. The German theologian Albert Schweitzer said that one of the deficiency of Buddhism is that it teaches only what he called *gedanken mitleid*, 'thought compassion.' As far as Theravada is concerned it would be very difficult to disagree with him.

**The Buddha Recast**

Theravada Buddhism is in crisis everywhere. All Theravadin countries are suffering from corrupt or unstable democracy, dictatorship or civil war. Most are also going through a period of rampant development and rapid social change. People look to the Sangha for answers and guidance but all they get is more of the same. Like the brahmins at the time of the Buddha the Sangha seem to be able to do little more than 'say what has been said and sing what has been sung.' Most Buddhist leaders are so out of touch that they are not even aware of being in the midst of a crisis. Prof. L.O.Gomez has summed up the situation well; 'More often than not, the modern Buddhist lives complacently encapsulated in the ready-made solutions of his ancestors, not only oblivious to the precarious position of Buddhism today, but of the problems raised by Buddhist doctrine as a world-view in this century and of the issues that confront Buddhism today.' Calls for reform are beginning to be heard but inevitably the solution is seen simply as a return to more strict Vinaya practice; that is, equipping monks for living in the 2nd century BCE rather than in the 21st cent CE. Meaningful change is unlikely to happen anyway. The impetus for reform is usually aroused by highlighting misunderstandings, criticizing malpractice and naming culprits and south-east Asians have a strong cultural antipathy towards any open disagreement or contention. In Sri Lanka even the most well-meaning criticism of the religion is silenced by branding it 'a Christian plot to undermine Buddhism.' The resistance to hearing anything negative about Theravada, particularly the Sangha, is almost total.

The fate of Mahayana in Korea, Japan, Singapore and to a lesser extent Taiwan, countries which underwent modernization in the 50's and 60's, suggests what is in store for Theravada. Statistics from those countries show that as people became better educated they were more likely to gravitate towards either secularism or Christianity. If evidence is needed that Theravada is failing to address the emotional and spiritual needs of many modern Sri Lankans one need only see how enormously popular devotion to Sai Baba and Kataragama (the Hindu god of war) has become in the last thirty years. Peasants and simple folk in Theravadin lands may remain loyal to the faith but the young, the educated and the intellectuals will drift away if things do not change. This process is already well underway in Sri Lanka and to a lesser extent in Thailand and with the gradual penetration of modernization into Burma will begin there sooner or later too. The tragedy is that the teachings of the Buddha in the Pali Tipitaka are probably better able to address contemporary problems and needs than any other ancient teachings. But it is not the Pali Tipitaka's practical psychology, its spirit of inquiry, and the social implications of its ethics or its humanistic outlook that are emphasized in Asia. There Theravada is committed to mindless formalism, indifferent to social issues and accommodating towards the worst kinds of superstitions.

It might appear from all that has been said that I would advocate throwing the old Buddha image with all its cracks, missing pieces and dents on to the scrap heap and leaving it at that. However, there might be another alternative. The metal the image is made from may be corroded and rusty but it is still of inestimable value. The image's style might be at odds with modern tastes but a skilled sculptor could fashion a more contemporary and beautiful form. The old Buddha image needs to be melted down and cast again in a new mold. What will happen to Theravada in Asia remains to be seen but right now the signs are not encouraging. Despite emphasizing change as a concept most Theravadins have what Henry Olcott called 'an innate passive resistance to any innovation' and this is particularly true of the Sangha. The situation outside Theravada's traditional homeland – Europe, America, Australia, India and parts of south-east Asia - is very different. There it offers the

possibility for renewal, of exploring the Dhamma free from the centuries of accretions, of drawing out of it new and more revenant meanings and implications. But with a few exceptions this does not seem to have happened yet. Rather than adopting the timeless Dhamma, most new Theravadins are merely copying the time-bound assumptions and forms that prevail in Theravada's homelands.

I have occasionally heard those familiar with the real state of Theravada say that even if it dies out in Asia at least it will survive in the West. This might be a comforting thought but is it really possible? One of the most noticeable features of Theravadin groups in the West is just how small they are, how slowly they grow and how frequently they peter out. This is particularly striking when compared to the widespread interest in Eastern spirituality amongst the general population and the success of Tibetan Buddhism, Zen, Vedanta and yoga. Theravadin groups attract a lot of people but the dour uninspiring atmosphere which they usually exude means that few are encouraged to stay. The presence of a monk is often a problem too. He is the focus of all attention, a good part of the group's activities consist of catering to his needs and if there is any teaching it will be done by him. The aura of sanctity and authority that surrounds the monk inhibits others from coming forward as teachers of Dhamma. When the monk is absent the group goes into suspended animation; if he leaves or dies it fades away. Another problem is that too many Asian monks in the West are not really there to spread the Dhamma. Getting PR or citizenship, finishing their education then disrobing and, in the case of those who head for Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore, collecting money, are amongst other the less noble motives. Even monks who genuinely wish to teach are often slow to develop the skills needed to communicate with Westerners.

I joined a Theravadin group in Australia at the age of seventeen and when I visited again some fourteen years later it still had about the same numbers of members, all of them different except for a tiny core group and the man who had been president for many years had reverted to Catholicism. In London I was invited to speak over several weeks at a Buddhist group which had been established for nearly forty years. The largest number of people who attended my talks was eleven and I was told that this was the usual number when a monk speaks; even fewer come to hear a lay speaker. I know of a Buddhist center in Singapore which had a succession of listless Sri Lankan monks for about twenty years and never attracted more than a few people. Quite by chance they eventually they got a Tibetan monk and within eighteen months the place came to life and is now one of the largest and most active centers in the country. Ethnic temples in the West can have large congregations but these are usually made up mainly of expatriate Asians. Most of their activities are ritualistic and conducted in Asian languages which means that they attract only a few Westerners. As second and third generation Asians grow up with Western expectations and speaking Western languages they too find the ethnic temples have little to offer. Within two generations these centers will probably have faded away. In reality Asian Theravadins in the West are no more interested in Dhamma there than they were when they were living in their countries of origin. Their primary concern is with ethnicity, tradition and keeping alive memories of the old country.** There is nothing wrong with this, in fact it is admirable. But it makes almost no contribution spreading the Dhamma beyond the expatriate community or even the next generation of that community.

** On some of these points see Paul David Numrich's *Old Wisdom in the New World*, 1996.

There are however four Theravadin organizations outside Theravada's traditional homeland which have attracted a significant number of people and could be said to have a national and even an international profile. It could be instructive to look at these groups to see what the key to their very un-Theravadin vitality is. The largest and most widespread such organization in the West today is that founded by S.N.Goenka. Despite Goenka's longstanding insistence that what he teaches is not Theravada or even Buddhism it very clearly is and so I will treat it as such. In some ways this movement is typically Theravadin. It is strongly sectarian, it is schismatic, its meditation is technique-orientated and Abhidhamma-based and it incorporates various folk superstitions and pseudo-scientific concepts into its practice ('pure' techniques and locations, vibrations,

experiencing individual atoms, etc). In other ways it is quite untypical – its main activity is meditation, it is an entirely lay movement, it has a distinct evangelical feel and it involves itself in some social work. Goenka himself is an inspiring individual and he has brought a businessman's drive and acumen to his movement. He has also taken care to encourage and train teachers to take his place. These factors can, I believe, account for this movement's success so far and its likely continuance after Goenka passes from the scene.

In 1977 the first of Ajahn Chah's disciples arrived in the West and since that time they have established thirteen monasteries worldwide and have attracted a large following. In the UK for example there are nearly forty meditation groups associated with this movement. Given its fundamentalist Vinaya practice, its clericocentrisity and its strong adherence to Thai cultural forms, the success of the Ajahn Chah movement comes as something of a surprise. This success can be explained mainly by the number of exceptionally gifted and inspiring teachers the movement has so far produced. These teachers have been able to attract a following by their high ethical standards, their commitment and the very practical and appealing way they present meditation. Their ability to rationalize their fundamentalist Vinaya practice has also been able to mollify people who might otherwise be put off by such things. How the Ajahn Chah movement will fare in the long term remains to be seen though. If it can continue to attract candidates for the monkhood and to produce inspiring teachers it may keep growing. If it is unable to do this it may have to rely more and more on Thai monks and will then slowly degenerate into just another ethnic organization catering to the ritual needs of expatriate Asians. Another potentially more serious problem is that all the Ajahn Chah monasteries in the West are largely dependant on funds from Thailand. If this money stops for some reason the movement may be unable to maintain itself.

The two most promising movements in the West based on the Buddhism of the Pali Tipitaka are the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts and the Spirit Rock Meditation Center in California. Since its founding in 1976 the IMS has slowly and quietly grown so that it now has over a hundred centers and affiliated meditation groups in America and Canada. In 1984 Jack Kornfield, one of the original founders of the IMS, started the Spirit Rock Meditation Center and the two groups still have close contacts with each other. All the founders of the IMS and the SRMC are lay men and women who studied with various teachers in Asia and then took what they had learned back to the West. Recently the IMS inaugurated The Barre Institute of Buddhist Studies where those practicing meditation can come and learn Buddhist psychology and philosophy and other spiritual disciplines. Although both groups draw much of their inspiration from the Pali Tipitaka they are accommodating towards other related traditions. But they do not just mouth the rhetoric of Zen, Vajrayana, Krishnamurti and contemporary psychology, they utilize such teachings and disciplines to help read deeper meanings into Buddhist categories and to approach them from different perspectives. The result is a fresh, dynamic and practical approach to meditation and the spiritual life. Equally as important, the IMS and the SRMC try to creatively apply Dhammic values to contemporary needs and problems. Their Teachers Code of Ethics is one of many examples of this. Both the IMS and the SRMC are organized around a community of teachers and there is open, transparent decision making in all matters instead of the usual Theravadin structure where a single person, usually a monk, dominates.

In trying to identify factors common to the groups mentioned above two things immediately come to mind. The first is that they all emphasize meditation. Westerners are primarily interested in practical rather than theoretical spirituality and if it is presented to them in an inspiring and meaningful way they will come. The second is that neither the driving forces behind any of these movements or most of their members are from traditional Theravadin backgrounds. The inspiration behind the Ajahn Chah movement was of course a Thai but its monasteries in the West were all established by Western monks and are staffed and run by them. Goenka was born in Burma but was from an orthodox Hindu family and all the founders of the IMS and the SRMC are Americans. Theravadin cultural conditioning seems to be like a soporific drug that deaden creativity and sap the

ability to do anything beyond repeating old familiar patterns of behavior. Those free from such conditioning are more likely to initiate, adapt and consider new possibilities. A factor common to three of the movements mentioned above which is probably also significant to their success is that they are entirely lay. The very fact that lay teachers do not wear a 'uniform' or require being treated with barrier-creating formalities gives other lay people the confidence that they can and indeed *should* know and practice the Dhamma fully. Moreover, time, energy and resources that would otherwise be spent on looking after monks can be directed towards more productive things.

## Buddhayana

If the Dhamma of the Pali Tipitaka is ever to be accepted in the West it is going to have to shake off the retarding influence of Theravada. Having described how Theravada is and why it is like that I would like to offer at least a partial vision of how a new Buddhism might be. A revitalized Theravada would be so different from its listless narrow predecessor that it would be only right to call it something else. Another name would also emphasize a conscious desire to evolve new interpretations of the Dhamma rather than just copying or trying to rationalize the old ones. The term theravada itself occurs only once in the Pali Tipitaka where, significantly, it is equated with 'mere lip service, mere repetition' (M.I,164). What name could a new Buddhism go by? The Buddha told his disciples that when others asked what religion they practiced they should say that they were Sakyaputtas, offspring or children of the Sakyan. This is a very endearing name but unfortunately it does not lend itself well to modern usage. On another occasion he called his teachings vibhajjavada, the doctrine of analysis, a name which reflects some aspects of his teachings but not all. Scholars usually describe the teachings in the Pali Tipitaka as primitive Buddhism or early Buddhism. The first of these names conjurs up the image of a monk wearing a bear skin rather than a yellow robe while the second refers only to the Dhamma's temporal dimension. Navayana, the New Way, is better but would not be entirely correct. The revitalized Buddhism I envisage would be contemporary in many ways while still drawing most of its inspiration and nourishment from the Buddha, that is, from the past, and so in one sense would not be new. Dhammavada or Buddhavada are perhaps a bit pretentious. For the purposes of these reflections I will use the term Buddhayana, the Buddha's Way. Such a name would be descriptively accurate, it follows naturally from the names of the earlier expressions of Dhamma – Hinayana, Mahayana and Tantrayana - and it rolls of the tongue well. What would this Buddhism for the 21$^{st}$ century, and hopefully for subsequent ones as well, be like?

Buddhayana would be governed by a properly constituted and legally recognized mahasabha, something like the Board of Governors of the Methodist Church, the Board of Jewish Deputies or perhaps better, the Western Buddhist Order (WBO) and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO). The mahasabha would be a corporate body owning all Buddhayana property and assets and represent it in all matters. The mahasabha would consist of four members – a monk, a nun, a male lay teacher and a female lay teacher who would be elected by local temples, monastic communities and other groups from which they came and they would hold their positions for ten years. The presidency of the mahasabha would circulate every ten years – a monk one time, a nun next, then a lay man etc. This arrangement would guarantee that the needs and concerns of all members of the Buddhayana community were taken into account and heard and that each would make its own unique contribution to the development of Buddhayana.

For Buddhayana the term Sangha would mean 'spiritual community.' Anyone, clerical or lay, who was fully committed to the Dhamma would be considered a member of the Sangha. This accords with a concept already implicit in the suttas where the Buddha says that a monk, nun, lay man or lay woman who is 'accomplished in wisdom, disciplined, confident, learned, upholding Dhamma and living according to it' illuminates the Sangha (A.II,8). All monks and nuns would receive a full education in Buddhism, Pali, history of Buddhism, psychology and philosophy *before* their ordination. During their education and training they would be instructed in meditation and also be

psychologically assessed to see whether they were suited to the monastic life or for the role of being teachers. Academic accomplishments would be important in selecting candidates but personal development would be just as important. Physical disciplines like hatha yoga and tai chi would form an integral part of the training also. There would be three orders or nikayas within both the monastic and the lay Sangha – a contemplative order, a pastoral order and an academic order. Monastics in this first order would mainly be involved in solitude and self development but would be expected to make some contribution to the community as well - conducting meditation retreats and doing counseling and conflict resolution work. Those in the pastoral order would run local Buddhist centers and receive the appropriate training to equip them for this role. Monks and nuns of the academic order would be the scholars of the Buddhayana, teaching in universities, doing research work, advising the mahasabha on doctrinal matters, giving the Buddhist perspective on various issues when needed and also acting as dhammadutas both within their own countries and overseas. The monks and nuns of these last two orders would all have a regular meditation practice and also spend at least two months each year in retreat with those from the contemplative order.

Buddhayanist monks and nuns would *genuinely* renounce on being ordained, giving all their assets to the Sangha and anything they earned or inherited subsequently would also become the property of the Sangha. The Vinaya would govern the behavior of all monastics. Certain rules would be disregarded, just as is done in Theravada, the only difference being which rules were followed and which were not. Buddhayana monks and nuns would abide by the Parajikas as well other rules relevant to monastic living and the modern world. There would also be a Code of Conduct to cover matters not dealt with by these rules and this would be modified as circumstances required. There would be a body to which complaints about serious breaches of discipline by monastics could be made, it would have the power to investigate such accusations, suggest appropriate punishments and when necessary recommend expulsion from the Sangha. All monasteries would aim to be self-supporting. Monks and nuns of the contemplative order would run businesses making high quality labor intensive products, operate hospices and conduct retreats. Such enterprises would provide monastics with opportunities for mindfulness in daily life, provide their monasteries with an income and make a contribution to the community. Monks and nuns would normally wear their distinctive and beautiful robes but where necessary or expedient they might don ordinary cloths. They would have common sense enough to know that ‘outward form does not make a monk’ (Dhp.266).

Even when open-minded Theravadins discuss the possibilities of reestablishing the nun’s Sangha the deliberations always seem to revolve around how to reconcile doing this with what the Vinaya says. Such discussions could go on for centuries. Whatever the Buddha said or is supposed to have said, Buddhayanists would believe that it is wrong to exclude woman from the monastic life, that it is inappropriate in the 21$^{st}$ century to require them to always take second place to a male and that it is degrading to treat them as if they had some sort of contagious disease. They would take as their guide on this and several other issues the Kalama Sutta in which the Buddha says; ‘Do not go by tradition…do not go by the sacred text … But when you yourself know that certain things are right, good, skillful and when followed or practiced results in happiness and benefit, then follow them’ (A.I,188). If no other solution to the problem could be found the first women candidates to the monastic Sangha would be ordained by monks and all subsequent ones would receive the double ordination. If these women were not accepted as real nuns by traditional Theravadins they would not loose too much sleep over it. In Buddhayana nuns and lay woman teachers would have respect, recognition and opportunity in accordance with their commitment and achievements, just like anyone else.

Being realistic enough to realize that monasticism is never going to be significant in Western society Buddhayana would develop an order of lay teachers similar to Protestant pastors or better, to the Dharmacariyas and Dharmacariyinis of WBO. Some of these might marry, others might choose to remain single. Many monks and nuns would have been lay teachers before ordaining. At least one forward-looking and thoughtful Sri Lankan monk has already made a move in this direction.

Ven. Piyananda of Los Angles has a program of lay training and ordination which has had some success and could well be a model for similar efforts. Lay teachers would run local Buddhist temples or assist monks or nuns in running them and involve themselves in social work. They would receive an adequate salary from the congregation. Buddhayana lay teachers would be known for their quiet unobtrusive efforts to help others, especially in areas that are strong points of the Dhamma, – relaxation training, counseling, animal welfare, hospice work etc.

Like all responsible citizens, Buddhayana monastics, lay teachers and ordinary followers would have a deep love for their country but this would never blind them to the reality that their main commitment was to the Dhamma, which transcends nationality, race and culture. Knowing full well that the Buddha taught for all humankind they would see themselves as citizens of the world and work for the benefit of all, not just for 'our people' or 'our country.' As an inviolable principle, no Buddhayanists whether monastic or lay would ever be involved in or seek to justify any form of violence. If required by law to join the army in time of war they would willingly serve as medics, nurses or stretcher-bearers but would never bear arms or fight. Buddhayanists would take the Precepts seriously rather than just recite them mindlessly as is usually done in Theravada. They would never drink or smoke and they would have a strong leaning towards vegetarianism. Between each other they would retain the anjali (palms together and head slightly bowed) as a graceful and distinctly Buddhist greeting and salutation. When anjalied themselves monks and nuns would always be humble enough and polite enough to return the salutation.

Recognizing that the prevailing interpretations of the Pali Tipitaka has few insights that could be used in its development, Buddhayana should be confident enough of itself to seek nourishment and examples from other sources. To help breath new life into the understanding and practice of meditation it would enter into dialogue with the Ch'an, Zen and Dzogchen traditions, with modern psychology and also perhaps with the teachings of people like Vimala Thakar. Such dialogue is well under way in the West, particularly in the USA, and has already proved fruitful. Buddhist-Christian dialogue has been going on for some decades but is usually initiated by and directed by Christians themselves and not surprisingly they are the ones who benefit most from it. Nonetheless, there are three areas where dialogue with Christianity might prove useful for an emergent Buddhayana. The first concerns how monasticism might function and survive in the modern world. Catholic monastic orders have declined dramatically in the last forty years but those that survive could be models for how Buddhayana monasteries might function. A blending of Catholic practicality and the best of the Vinaya might ensure the continuance of the monastic Sangha. The second area where Buddhayana could benefit from Christian input concerns social engagement and practical compassion. What is it in Christianity that has made love so central to the life and practice of its followers? What is it in Theravada that has retarded this from happening? What aspects of the Buddha's teachings could be emphasized or reappraised so that a Buddha-like compassion might once more animates and motivate those who live by the Dhamma? Teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh have already begun exploring such issues from the Mahayana perspective but more needs to be done and much could be learned from Christianity.

There is one other area where Buddhayana might be enriched by dialogue with Christians. Theravadian hostility towards all forms of beauty has prevented the development of any sacred music or plainsong beyond the most rudimentary forms. Thai chanting is not unpleasant to the Western ear although its simple tune and rhythm offer limited scope for further development. Burmese and especially Sri Lankan chanting is little more than a caterwaul. Sonorous music, song and chanting can have an enormous value in communal worship, they can give expression to saddha and they can even be an adjunct to meditation. The Buddhayana would study the rich Christian tradition of plainsong and sacred music and try to develop forms of each that would be suitable to use with Pali gatha and other mediums.

Great emphasis would be given to Dhamma education in Buddhayana. Apart from the normal

activities at local temples (Sunday sermons and pujas, Dhamma classes and discussions, group meditations monthly weekend retreats, Sunday School, etc) there would be occasional courses on the more profound aspects of the Dhamma. An accurately translated and readable edition of the Tipitaka would be available in every temple. However, most people would be familiar on the Cula Tipitaka, a single volume containing a good representative collection of suttas including those relevant to lay people. Both would have the repetitions carefully edited out, a rational and easily usable reference system and a detailed index. To supplement this there would be a multi-volume *Encyclopedia of Dhamma* comprehensively and authoritatively covering every aspect of the Buddhism. Both the Cula Tipitaka and the *Encyclopedia* would be available in every public library in the country. These and other educational resources would be available from the Buddhayana's own publishing company which, being run by monastics, would be able to produce them at reduced prices. Buddhayana would have at least two seminaries, one for training monks and male lay teachers and another for nuns and female lay teachers. The education would be liberal, critical, wide-ranging and imbued with the spirit of the Dhamma. Some graduating from these institutions would go on to university to do specialist studies before commencing on their duties.

Another aspect of the Buddhayana's educational endeavors would be to promote the Dhamma as widely as possible. The Buddha's exhortation to 'go forth for the good of the many' would be taken very seriously. Rationally planned campaigns to promote the Dhamma within specific groups and in certain areas would be a prominent part of Buddhayana activity. All universities would have a Buddhayanist chapel, a chaplain and a study group as would many other institutions. Declining, weak, or neglected Buddhist communities in Asia – Malay speaking Thais in northern Malaysia, Dalits in India, Tamangs and Newaris in Nepal, Chakmas in Bangladesh etc, would be major beneficiaries of dhammaduta campaigns. Some of these people would be brought to the West for training while Buddhayanists in the West would be specially trained to serve such communities. Together they would work for both the spiritual and material welfare of these people. The Trailoka Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayak Gana, the Indian branch of the WBO, and the Tzu Chi Foundation of Taiwan would be excellent models for such work. Buddhayana would give special attention to promoting the Dhamma in India, not only because of its enormous potential there but also as an expression of gratitude to the Indian people for giving the world the Buddha.

How would Buddhayana fund itself and its various undertakings and projects? It goes without saying that Buddhayanists would never squander their precious resources on gigantic Buddhas, garish over-decorated temples or lavish ceremonies. In fact they would the severest critics of such embarrassing wastage. Simply not having this drain within the Buddhayana community would mean that there was plenty of money available. Buddhayana would seek to rationalize and modernize the open-handed generosity characteristic of traditional Theravada and this too would be a good source of funds. Like other charitable organizations, some of its good works would be eligible for government grants while others would attract the generosity of a sympathetic public. The business enterprises run by some monasteries would be highly profitable and the excess after expenses were met would go into a central treasury, although all financial matters would be handled by lay persons. Likewise, when there was an excess in local temples this would go into this same treasury. This central treasury would be carefully managed and temples, monasteries or groups would submit proposals when they needed funds. When these were approved grants would be made.

Buddhayanists will never be even a large minority within Western societies but their influence will be out of proportion to their numbers. Like Quakers and liberal Jews they would be respected for their liberal and humane outlook, admired for their charitable work and be well-known as progressive and active community leaders. The best advertisement for Buddhism would be the lives and examples of Buddhayanists themselves. A good number of well educated thoughtful people would see Buddhayana as an attractive alternative to the dogmatism of Christianity or the emptiness of secularism. Far from being just an exotic curiosity Buddhayana would be well integrated into Western society.

Is all this just a pipe dream or could it be actually feasible? Something like what I have called Buddhayana has already been envisaged and brought into being, although not surprisingly, by someone more influenced by Mahayana and Vajrayana than by Theravada. The Western Buddhist Order and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order were founded in 1967 and now have dozens of centers and thousands of members throughout the West and in India. The large and flourishing Indian branch of the FWBO is known as the Trilokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana. There are Buddhist groups in the West which at first glance appear to be firmly established but which are actually dependant on monks from Asia or Western monks trained in Asia, on funds from Asia or from Asian expatriate communities. The WBO has seen the danger of this sort of dependency and has succeeded in being self-supporting and self-sustaining. The apparent success of some other groups is due to a single charismatic teacher and they quickly go into the doldrums when he or she dies, leaves or falls from grace. The WBO's initial success was to a large extent due to Sangharashita's charismatic personality but the main focus has always been on the Dhamma, the benefits of the spiritual life and the attraction of being part of a dynamic and growing community. The WBO runs its own highly successful business enterprises freeing it from a complete dependence on donations and which at the same time provides its members with meaningful work. The Goenka and the Ajhan Chah movements are centered almost entirely on meditation while the WBO takes a more integrated approach, stressing meditation but also the intellectual, the social and even the economic and aesthetic dimensions of the Dhamma. This not only does justice to the richness of the Buddhist tradition, it gives the WBO a much wider appeal as well. Members of the WBO are almost the only Western Buddhists I ever meet who seem to have an informed view of Buddhism in Asia instead of the usual dreamy idealized one and I suspect that this has had a role in their success too. It has allowed them to see and adopt what is good in the Buddhist tradition and reject what is not, rather than swallowing the whole package.

Historians often say that as Buddhism spread it changed to make itself relevant to the new cultures it encountered. However, this suggests that some sort of agreed upon policy was at work and that the process of adjustment and adaptation was a conscious one, which was certainly not the case. Change took place haphazardly, often unintentionally and sometimes to Buddhism's detriment One of many examples of this would be the caste systems in Sri Lanka and the Katmandu Valley. When Buddhism came to these two regions caste was already established but rather than change society, it was Buddhism that changed. Buddhism compromised on its teachings of human equality and dignity and accommodated itself to the institution of caste. Thus even today Sri Lanka's Siyam Nikaya will only ordain males from the highest caste and Newari Buddhists will not allow people of other castes into their temples. Sangharashita's genius was not just that he saw the need for indigenization long before anyone else but that he understood that the process of indigenization had to be *conscious* and *deliberate*. He set out to evolve a movement with an organizational structure and an interpretation of the Dhamma that would take into account the realities of Western society without compromising with those aspects of it that were at odds with Dhamma. Not surprisingly, the result has been highly successful and qualifies Sangharashita to be considered one of the few original Buddhist thinkers of the last three hundred years. It also qualifies him to be considered the first authentic Western Buddhist as opposed to being merely a Westerner who has adopted the Buddhism of Tibet, Japan, Burma or Thailand. This is not to say that the WBO has all the answers but it is an important step in the right direction. The WBO has not been free from problems either, the most serious of which have been caused by Sangharashita's somewhat dubious interpretations of several aspects of the Dhamma. But it has shown itself capable of change and more importantly, of critical self-examination - a sophistication entirely absent amongst Asian Buddhists. The WBO proves that a cross-pollination of the best of modern Western thought with the best of ancient Buddhist wisdom can revitalize the Dhamma. What is needed now is more realistic visionaries like Sangharashita.

## Final Word

It would be easy to think that because Theravada has such ancient and apparently deep roots in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia that it will be there forever. But this would be a dangerous assumption. Religions allegiances can and do change very fast, particularly in the modern world. For eight hundred years Buddhism flourished in Udyana in what is now northern Pakistan but for reasons that are not clear it eventually withered away. When the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang visited in the 7th century (before the advent of Islam it should be noted) he was able to write; 'There are some 1400 old monasteries although they are now generally ruined and desolate. Formerly there were some 18,000 monks in them but gradually their numbers have dwindled so that now there are very few.' For nearly a millennia Indonesians were predominately Buddhist or Hindu and they raised spectacular monuments to their respective faiths. But within a remarkably short period and without any apparent persecution both gave way to Islam. During a recent visit to Cambodia I was shocked to see how many evangelical Christian churches there were and how many people they attracted. Just thirty years ago there were almost no Christians in the country, now they make up a significant minority and all indications are that their numbers will continue to grow. When one sees the smiling but passive and backward-looking Cambodian monks it is hard be optimistic about the future of the Dhamma in that unlucky country. Theravadins congratulate themselves that their Buddhism is taking the West by storm but the statistics do not bear this out. Many more people are attracted to yoga and Vedantic groups let alone to Tibetan and Zen Buddhism. More tellingly, evangelical Christianity is growing much faster in Theravadin countries than Theravada is growing in the West. And of course Christian missionaries are many times more motivated, better prepared and well financed than their Buddhist counterparts. Whatever Theravada's future in Asia it certainly has no long term future in the West. Western Buddhists must develop confidence enough to stop accommodating Theravada, rationalize it or copying it. At present Western societies are very receptive to all types of Buddhism but there is no guarantee that this trend will continue. It would be a tragedy if Buddhism fails to take advantage of this rare and wonderful opportunity. Now is the time to evolve a new Buddhism that can speak to a new millennium.

Andhakarena onaddha padipam na gavessatha?

## APPENDIX

This first article appeared in the pages of the *Maha Bodhi Journal* in 1931. I reprint it here because it is the earliest example I have found of a Western Buddhist monk seeing the need for renewal in the Theravadin Sangha and giving suggestions, however briefly, as to how this might be done. Although the author's language is awkward and dated his sincerity is still evident as is his frustration and disillusionment. The article is of interest also because it shows that all the absurdity and corruption that Prajnananda was familiar with are still alive and well more than seventy years later. If anything has changed it is that the world has moved on while the Sangha has not thus putting it even further behind. As for Bhikkhu Prajnananda himself, I have been unable to find out anything about him other than that he was an Englishman. After making his brief and futile appeal he disappeared from history, almost certainly to disrobe. Like many Westerners before and since he no doubt entered the Sangha believing that it would enable him to soar to the spiritual heights only to find himself weighed down by medieval superstition and nonsensical formalism. The second article was written under a pseudonym by a senior Sri Lankan civil servant and leading lay Buddhist and was published on Vesak 1997 in *The Buddhist*, the organ of The Young Men's Buddhist Association. That such a conservative body as the YMBA should publish this unusually blunt article suggests that even they can no longer deny or hide the crisis in the Sri Lankan Sangha. To head off charges that some of my observations about Asian Theravadins are due to an 'inherent Western sense of superiority' or that I am really an agent for Catholic Action I reproduce this article here to show what a few thoughtful and honest Sri Lankans think about the state of Theravada in

their country. I have made a few minor changes to this article for the sake of clarity.

**The Reform of the Sangha**
Bhikkhu Prajnananda

If Buddhism is to keep its rightful place amongst the religions of the world and become an increasing power for progress and enlightenment, the whole subject of the position and condition of the Sangha will have to be examined. Already prominent laymen in Burma, Siam, Ceylon, and elsewhere, view with misgivings the present state of affairs and know that sooner or later some alterations will have to be made. Nearly everyone sees signs of decay in the Order, that Order that has continued for 2500 years, but today there are new conditions and forces in the world and unless something radical is done this decay will increase until either the Sangha dies out, or becomes a dead letter, the refuge of the ignorant and unworthy.

The Buddha very wisely laid down rules for admission to the Order, that youths should be of good character, high minded, not physically defective or suffering from disease, yet such rules are sadly neglected today, and we find men wearing the Robe to whom not one of these conditions would apply. And the great difficulty is this, the laymen are not sufficiently organized to promote much needed reforms and the monks are afraid to modernize certain Vinaya rules for fear of offending the laymen.

Again, the Buddha showed his wisdom by admitting that many of these rules would not be suitable for all times and conditions, and allowed a modification of them when necessary. This was done in the Mahayana by Tsongkapa with most excellent results, but in the Hinayana none of the Theras have been courageous or strong enough to adapt these rules to modern conditions, with the result that the Sangha is now overburdened with many worn out customs, traditions and observances which have become useless and in some cases quite harmful. Many of the rules were doubtless necessary in ancient times but under modern conditions have become quite unreasonable. I could quote a whole list, some of them most laughable, and it is an insult to the intelligence of the Buddha to suppose that he would tolerate or support them. For example, here in Burma, in the afternoon a Bhikkhu can drink iced mineral water but not hot water, must not eat fruit but can smoke a box of cigars, can eat jaggary but not onions, beetel nut and not coconut. The shoes must have a strap between the toes, and not over the toes, the latter a serious offence. He must not bathe in a lake in case he might swim, but he can go to the bioscope (cinema) and see demoralizing pictures for there is nothing in the Vinaya to prevent him. All the bioscopes, football matches and race meetings are thronged with Yellow Robes, and no protest is made, but a poor little Samanera who eat an orange on a hot afternoon would soon come under a heavy penalty.

Again, the Sangha is actually becoming an obstacle to the health and happiness of the people. Many of the Viharas are in a dirty and unsanitary condition producing disease and early death to the men, women and children living near them. So bad has it become that the Red Cross Society offered to provide sanitary latrines for the monk, so that malaria and fever could be reduced. The offer was indignity refused as being 'against the Vinaya.' To be quite fair, however, the Monks are not entirely to blame, they merely try to observe regulations which are unsuitable today, and must either be honest and break them, or become morally dishonest and keep them under silent protest. While travelling in India recently it was necessary to break several precepts. I had to touch money to buy railway tickets, sit in trains with women, eat in the afternoon when I had nothing in the morning and when in hospital actually slept on a board bed. Yet my conscience was clear, for I regard the will to become a Buddha to save mankind from suffering as more important than worrying about rules which are only the dead letter and not the true spirit of the Dhamma.

But enough. The present state of affairs is evident to every observer, and it is more important now to suggest remedies. And here I write with diffidence for I know that the conservatism of the

Sangha will not be easily shaken, but it may prompt a future Buddhist Conference to consider the whole matter. I will therefore merely state certain reforms by which the prestige and influence of the Order could possibly be improved.

First. Admission to the Sangha. This should be strictly regulated for there are too many Bhikkhus at present whom the people in their present impoverished condition find difficulty in supporting. Only youths of good parentage or spiritually minded, perfect physically and mentally and of unblemished character should be ordained, to whom a certificate of registration, renewable annually, would be granted. This would keep out unworthy characters, and ensure a higher standard among the Monks.

Secondly. Education. The present lack of education in the Sangha is deplorable, and in consequence it produces no great preachers, philosophers or thinkers. Recently in Burma a Bhikkhu was needed to preach the Dhamma in English. Not one could be found anywhere. With hardly any knowledge of modern languages, science, history or geography how can such a body of men command the respect of the educated laity? Most religions today are educating their priests making them useful and efficient, but the Sangha does nothing, and any attempt to give this modern education to the Bhikkhus is vigorously opposed by the Mahatheras. When last in Upper Burma I noticed the number of Christian Missions that had sprung up, and when I asked a prominent man the reason he replied, 'These missionaries have opened schools and hospitals and help us in many ways. They are doing the work of the Lord Buddha while our own Bhikkhus do nothing but sleep and smoke all day.' His indignation was great for he was a true follower of the Dhamma but he saw how things were going, and unless the Sangha became more educated and active it would cease to exist in those parts. We need educated self-sacrificing Monks to awaken the lion roar of the Buddha.

Thirdly. Food. The present food regulations observed by the Sangha do much more harm than good. They produce ill health, gluttony, bad habits, and dishonesty. Let me explain what I see almost daily. A Monk goes around with a bowl in the morning, gets meat, fish, fowl, rice, etc, food that heats the blood and has little nourishment. But he must eat it all before noon and then starve for eighteen hours, so he stuffs down much more usually than he can digest and so has to sleep for some hours after. Late in the afternoon he gets hungry and then has to chew tobacco, pan leaf and jaggery, and smoke innumerable cigarettes and cigars. Bad health often results, and while boys in day schools are taught that smoking is ruinous to health, in the Order they are actually encouraged to do so. And of course dishonesty naturally occurs, various tricks and methods to eat stealthily without laymen or other Bhikkhus knowing it.

Surely our great Lord Buddha would not approve of all this. It would be far better for the Monks to drink tea and eat fruit in the afternoon. This could be considered as a medicine and taken without infringement of the Vinaya. In my Vihara Samaneras are allowed to do so with excellent results. They are learning to become useful men to their religion and their country and not acquire those bad habits which they get in the orthodox Viharas. On an empty stomach one can really do very little. I recently debated with a Christian missionary. Before the meeting he had a splendid meal, but I arrived hungry having eaten nothing for nine hours. What chance does poor Bhikkhus stand under such conditions? To remedy these harmful conditions, tea and fruit should be allowed up till sunset.

Fourthly. Discouragement of Superstition. Pure Buddhism has today become overgrown with a mass of superstitions which the Buddha himself would be the first to discourage and which prevents its progress as people become more educated. The waste of money on innumerable candles, gold leaf, building pagodas, etc. is particularly deplorable when it could be much more wisely and humanely spent. Some Bhikkhus actually encourage superstition among ignorant people, teaching for example, if gold is put on a pagoda the giver will become rich, if a woman feeds many Monks she will be reborn as a beautiful boy, if money is given to the Sangha the happiness of the Brahmaloka is assured after death, teachings which pander to selfishness and are the complete negation of the selflessness which is the bed rock of the Buddha Dhamma. So many false customs,

traditions and beliefs are now associated with Buddhism that the educated layman naturally laughs at them, and our religion is likely to make poor progress in the West until we can get rid of all these excrescencies and show it to be the rational religion that it really is. The better education of the Sangha would be one of the best ways of achieving this.

Fifthly. Buddhist Unity. At present there is not only no unity between Buddhist monks of different countries there is actually hostility between them. The Burmese Bhikkhu has little regard for his Ceylon brother, and the latter regards the former with not as much affection as he should. The Chinese monk derides both as having "incomplete views" and the Japanese has very scant knowledge of the Sangha in other countries. And the tragedy is that while they are all agreed on essentials, - the Buddha and his Dhamma, they disagree on the unimportant national customs, traditions and observances which have sprung up and destroy all harmony between them. In Ceylon and Burma for example, a Bhikkhu can smoke but must not drink beer, but in Tibet a monk drinks as much native beer as he pleases but never smokes, which is a most serious offence. In one country a Monk must eat before noon, in other Buddhist countries the best meal of the Bhikkhus is generally after noon. Certainly the Lord Buddha could not have taught all these contradictions, and there will never be the Buddhist unity that is so desirable until local customs have less prominence and the true spirit of Buddhism is better understood. Then may we get a united Buddhist World.

Sixthly. Revival of Meditation. Not until the ancient Buddhist practice of meditation is revived can we have a spiritual Sangha. Today it has not only almost died out, it is actually laughed at in some Viharas, as those who have tried it know full well. Yet mind control and the awakening of the super-mind is the basis of all spiritual development, and is far superior to the mere empty repetition of the Scriptures which is all a Bhikkhu learns at present. I have met Yogis in India who were far nearer to the Iddhis and Samadhi than anyone I have seen in the Sangha and the years a Bhikkhu spends in learning Pali and repeating long passages from the Pitakas could be far better employed if he strove to realize, and help others to realize Nibbana, instead of only talking about it. The world needs men who can speak from actual experience of the reality of the spiritual states, and not those who can merely say, 'Thus have I heard.' The practice of meditation is of the utmost importance, far more important than the customs and rules upon which a Bhikkhu now wastes his time, and when this is followed the Sangha will regain the spiritual power it had in the days of old.

But I have written enough. Has Buddhism a message for the world today, a world that seems to be sinking deeper into misery, poverty and unbrotherliness? I believe it has, and that message must come from the Sangha. If this Sangha can be reformed, awakened and spiritualized it could regain the tremendous influence it had at the time of Asoka. If it cannot, then we can expect it to pass away as the Order of Bhikkhunis had done. If the Sangha dies, the Dhamma goes, and unless things change, to some future generation the name Buddha may be but a word recalled from the past. The Maha Bodhi Society and its supporters have earned the gratitude and admiration of innumerable people; the fight for Buddha Gaya, its hospitals and schools, the new Vihara at Sarnath, all redound to their credit. Will its support now be given to a crusade for the reform and uplift of the Sangha so that it could become a real force for the peace, progress and happiness of the world?

## Why Am I A Buddhist?

By Parakrama

Around a century ago Buddhist journals in colonial Ceylon, dazzled by the glamour of Europeans embracing Buddha Dhamma, gleefully published articles by some of them carrying such titles as 'Why I am a Buddhist.' Today, as an older Sinhala Buddhist, I look around with dismay at the disturbing milieu in which we find ourselves and I ask myself, 'Why am I a Buddhist?' I often ask myself this question, not because I doubt the Buddha Dhamma, but because I am deeply perturbed about the unseemly twists and turns taken by Sinhala 'exponents' and 'practitioners' of Buddhism in Sri Lanka today. This, dear reader, is a deliberately provocative article which, I hope, will make

Sinhala Buddhists think hard and long.

Memory takes me back about 25 years ago when well-meaning supporters honored the 80th birth anniversary of a revered bhikkhu by ordaining 80 young boys as samaneras. They were all the sons of poor village parents and all under ten years of age. The incessant sobbing of one of these boys, which kept him up all night and the next morning, yet echoes sadly in my ears. This incident symbolizes to me much that is wrong with the Sinhala Sangha. First and foremost, there seem to be almost no ‘volunteers’ who have sought the yellow robe with understanding and a sense of vocation. Most entrants to the Sangha have been ‘conscripted’ – young village boys pitchforked into the Sangha by poor parents ridding themselves of one more mouth to feed. In the older and more established Nikayas, scions of a few families have monopolized the position of Mahanayaka and are determined to retain their grip on these lucrative fiefdoms. They are all village boys, poorly educated, unprepared and often unwilling. This is the harsh truth that we must face and it is the root cause of the rot in the Sinhala Sangha.

It is no surprise that these ‘conscripts,’ unwittingly deprived of their boyhood and youth, grow up into hairy, unkempt undergraduates who, while pursuing studies irrelevant to the Dhamma, squat on pavements and roofs and march yelling unseemly slogans and waiving raising fists. Other, grown older and shrewder, have embarked on lucrative careers, some of which are listed below.
(1) Ayurvedic physicians and astrologers who ply their trade for money and perform no religious activities whatsoever. This is an ancient and well-trodden path, now more commercialized than ever and heavily advertised in the media.
(2) Paid employees of government institutions, mainly teachers, who personally pocket their wages. Some are now competing for other administrative jobs as well.
(3) Squatters on government land, canal banks and other unsalubrious, slummy surroundings who build rooms for rent, often for nefarious purposes. One recent such ‘temple’ had harbored a Tiger terrorist tenant and had ammunition buried in its grounds.
(4) Renting space in temples for the parking of cars, taxies and lorries. A bomb-laden terrorist lorry was recently found in such a ‘temple.’
(5) Conducting paid tuition classes for public examinations while failing to conduct Sunday schools for children.
(6) Establishing front organizations (ostensibly religious) to siphon vast sums of money from wealthy but gullible Japanese and Koreans who relish in photo-ops and hobnobbing with Sri Lankan VIP’s which monks can easily arrange.
(7) Temple robbers who plunder relics, ancient artifacts and palm leaf books for sale to antique dealers.
(8) Office bearers of trade unions, political and other non-religious organizations who control considerable funds and wallow in related publicity.
(9) Monks who act as priests of Sai Baba, the south Indian ‘god man,’ and who prostitute their temples and provide rich Sinhala matrons with a whitewash of ‘Buddhism’ for their primitive idolatry. Recently a ‘pilgrimage’ to Sai Baba was being organized to observe the five Precepts on Vesak at ‘His Lotus Feet!’ Need more be said of the ‘Buddhist’ matrons who pay such homage or the ‘bhikkhus’ who pander to them?
(10) Sculptors, artists and songwriters who hold public exhibitions and launch their ‘artistic’ works on the commercial market.
This sad list is merely illustrative and not exhaustive. Other examples abound.

We Sinhala Buddhists have to face up to the fact that most bhikkhus disgrace the Buddhist Sangha and aware laymen turn a blind eye to their misdeeds. All too few bhikkhus observe the Vinaya or study the Dhamma deeply or meditate to any effect. We all know that often sermons are by rote and of extraordinarily poor quality. There is too little original thinking, commentary or interpretation by discussion or in writing. The emphasis in most temples is on rituals and festivals aimed at raising money for the construction of yet more buildings, all broadcast by the very loudest of loudspeakers.

These shenanigans involves the temples in an incessant hunt for patronage. There is a constant quest for wealthy or socially /politically prominent supporters whose association with the temple will gain it more glory and the supporter more ‘merit.’ There is a tragic disregard for the religious needs of the community where the temple is located while prominent patrons are sought far and wide. The contrast with the Christian churches which assiduously serve their respective parishes is sadly obvious. Our temple management committees are just tame organizations for the greater glory of their temple and are in no way orientated to serve the spiritual needs of the Buddhist community.

Yet another tragicomic feature is the Sinhala Sangha’s thirst for ‘honors.’ Every nook and cranny boasts of a Mahanayaka or Anunayaka who revel in being photographed or telecast receiving his insignia of office from some politician of dubious integrity and transient fame. Another phenomena is that of the expatriate Sinhala monks who get themselves ‘anointed’ with due publicity as Mahanayaka of some far off non-Buddhist country or other. Their vanity is tragicomic and symbolic of the degradation of simple Sinhala Buddhist values. We Sinhala Buddhist almost always gloss over the issue of caste which lies at the root of the degradation of the Sinhala Sangha. It is a tragic farce that there is no organization in Sri Lanka as caste-ridden as the Sinhala Sangha. Every single caste boasts of its own Nikaya or sub-Nikaya. Nobody of an ‘outside’ caste can ever penetrate the hierarchy. They are often fobbed off with valueless high sounding titles carrying no authority. A blind eye however, is readily turned on white Europeans who are welcomed with open arms in every Nikaya. It is galling to see our ‘Mahanayakas’ lapping up the transient glory when VIP’s call on them for ‘blessings’ on assuming office.

The tragic results of this proliferation of caste-ridden Nikayas is the absence of discipline or the total unreadiness to exercise it over these errant bhikkhus by Nikayas that ordain them. The newspapers appall us with accounts of ‘bhikkhus’ found guilty of assault, rape, murder, financial racketeering and drunkenness. Not one of these malefactors has ever had the self-discipline to disrobe himself until his name has been cleared. Many shamelessly go to jail yet wearing their hallowed yellow robe. Tragically, no Sangha organization has ever exercised its inherent authority to disrobe a single errant robe-wearer.

Politics has long been the bane of the Sinhala Sangha. They readily appear on political platforms and other places where, under the guise of ‘saving Buddhism,’ they indulge in the most virulent communalism. To most of them Buddhism comes a long, long way behind their Sinhalaness. ‘Bhikkhus’ vociferously endorse a variety of political parties – each claiming to safeguard the Sinhala race better than their rivals. The Buddha’s exhortation to show loving kindness to all living beings does not seem to extend to the non-Sinhala peoples of Sri Lanka – if one listens to our ‘activist bhikkhus.’

Today our Buddhist youth drift rudderless into the 21$^{st}$ century with no intelligent guidance from the Sangha. We badly need a cohort of educated bhikkhus trained in modern thought who can provide Buddhist guidance to today’s youth engulfed in the myriad temptations of modern life. This is what we need – not larger, posher and louder temples. This is the real challenge the Sinhala Sangha has to face. Let us not deceive ourselves by the high visibility of the Sunday schools with their white clad boys and girls. They are the innocent victims of ill-prepared and unmotivated teachers who parrot goody goody clichés and cram them for the unseemly competition of academic exams in the Dhamma. We should remember that the insurgents of 1971 admitted under interrogation that they had all gone to Sunday schools! This vivid proof of the abject failure of such religious education never seems to have had any impact on the establishment which lumbers on regardless.

One final grouse against our premier Buddhist organizations which have ossified into havens for aged retirees. No young Buddhists have shown any interest in joining their fossilized ranks. Decades ago there were active and effective organizations led by Anagarika Dharmapala, Baron

Jayatillala and G. P. Malalasekera in their vigorous youth. We need all the young Buddhist intellects we can encourage to lead the community once again and wrestle the decedent Sangha back to its sacred vocation. But are these organizations and their sadly limited Sangha committees open enough? If they do not reform themselves to attract youth to their ranks, I foresee a rapid dissolution of the Buddha Dhamma among the Sinhalese while at the same time ever larger and richer temples flourish and loudspeakers blare dull sermons to sleepy old ladies.

In conclusion, let me try to answer my opening question –'Why am I a Buddhist?' It is because I am convinced of the truth of the Buddha Dhamma and as a Sinhalese it keeps me in touch with my roots and our ancestors who first embraced the Dhamma over 2300 years ago. My fervent hope is that we will rid ourselves of the dross that adheres to its practice in Sri Lanka and that the pristine Dhamma will lead our country for the millennia to come.

## A Select Bibliography


Ariyesako, Bhikkhu, *The Bhikkhu's Rules, A Guide for Laypeople*, 1998.
Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear*, 199.1
Bodhi, Bhikkhu, *The Necessity of Promoting Buddhism in Europe*, 2000.
- *Transendential Dependant Arising*, 1980.
Blackburn, Ann, M. *Buddhist Learning and textural Practice in Eighteenth-Century Lankan Monastic Culture*, 2001.
Breiter, Paul. *Venerable Father – A Life With Ahjahn Chah*, 1993.
Bucknell, R, and Kang, C. *The Meditative Way*, 1997.
Bunnang, J. *Buddhist Monks, Buddhist Laymen*, 1973.
*Epigraphia Zeylanica*, 1904-in progress, Vol. I,II,III,IV,V.
Geiger.W, *Mahavamsa*, London, 1912.
Gombrich, Richard, *Precept and Practice*, 1971.
Gombrich, R and Obeyesekere, G, *Buddhism Transformed*, 1988.
Gomez, Luis O, 'Karunabhavana; Notes on the Meaning of Buddhist Compassion', *The Tibet Journal*, Vol III, No 2, 1978.
Gunawardana.R.A.L.H, *Robe and Plough – Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early Medieval Sri Lanka*, 1979.
Harrison, Eric, *The Naked Buddha*, 1999.
Hinuber, v. Oskar. *A Handbook of Pali Literature*, 1996.
Ishii,Yoneo, *Sangha, State and Society-A Community Study of Thailand*, 1986.
Jackson, P. A, *Buddhism, Legitimization and Conflict*, 1989.
Kabilsingh, Chatsumarn, *Thai Women in Buddhism*, 1991.
Kantowaky, Detlef, *Saravodaya – The Other Development*, 1980.
Keown ,Damien, 'Morality in the Vissudhimagga', *The Journal of International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol.6, 1980.
Khantipalo, Bhikkhu, *Lay Buddhist Practice*, 1982.
Ling, T, O, *Buddhism, Imperialism and War*, 1979.
Maguhman, W. Somerset, *A Gentleman in the Parlor*, 1930.
Mahasi Sayadaw, *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, 1981.
- *Brahmavihara Dhamma*, 1989.
Mendelson,E.M, *Sangha and State in Burma*, 1975.
Nanamoli, Bhikkhu, *The Path of Purification*, 1956.
Nyanananda, *Concept and Reality*, 1971.
Nyanaponika, *Protection Through Satipatthana*, 1967.
Pannapadipo, Phra Peter, *Phra Farang: An English Monk in Thailand*, 1997.
Rahula,Walpola, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, 1956.
Seniviratne.H.L.*The Work of Kings-The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, 1999.
Southwold, Martin, 'True Buddhism and Village Buddhism in Sri Lanka', in *Religious Organization and Religious Experience*, Davis, J (ed) 1982.
Suksamran, Somboon, *Buddhism and Politics in Thailand*, 1982.
Tambiah, S. J. *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand*, 1970.
Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *The Buddhist Monks Code*, 1994.
Wirz, Paul, *Exorcism and the Art of Healing in Ceylon*, 1954.

**Some Books by S. Dhammika**

*Praised by the Wise*, 1987
*Good Question Good Answer*, 1987. (available in Arabic, Assamese, Burmese, Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Malaysia, Cambodian, Chinese, Hindi, Kannada, Ladakhi, Newari, Sinhala, Spanish, Tamang, Tamil and Vietnamese)
*Gemstones of the Good Dhamma*, 1987. (available in Bahasa Malaysia, Hindi and Newari)
*Encounters with Buddhism*, 1989. (available in Bahasa Indonesia and Sinhala)
*Matreceta's Hymn to the Buddha*, 1989.
*Buddha Vacana-Daily Readings from the Sacred Literature of Buddhism*,1989. (available in Bahasa Indonesia, Dutch, Chinese and Tamil)
*All About Buddhism-A Modern Introduction to an Ancient Spiritual Tradition*, 1990. (available in Bahasa Indonesia and Sinhala)
*Middle Land Middle Way-A Pilgrim's Guide to the Buddha's India*, 1991. (available in Burmese, Korean, Sinhala and Tibetan)
*The Sayings of the Buddha*, 1991.
*The Buddha and His Disciples*, 1992. (available in Sinhala)
*The Edicts of King Asoka***,** 1993.
*How to Protect Yourself from Cults*, 1993.
*Navel of the Earth-The History and Significance of Bodh Gaya*, 1996. (available in Burmese)
*Mahakarunika Katha* 2000. (in Sinhala only)
*Yellow Robe Red Flag-A Biography of Rahul Sankrityayan*, 2000.
*The Golden Goose and Other Jataka Stories*, 2005.
*A Guide to Bodh Gaya*, 2006.
*Sacred Island- A Buddhist Pilgrim's Guide to Sri Lanka*, 2006.
*A Guide to Buddhism A to Z*, 2006.
*A Little Book of Buddhist Names*, ( forthcoming)
*Dictionary of Flora and Fauna in the Pali Tipitaka*, (forthcoming)

Children's Books in Collaboration with Susan Harmer

*Rahula Leads the Way*, 1990.
*The Buddha and His Friends*, 1997. (available in Bahasa Indonesia)
*Anathapindaka and other Stories*, 1998. (avaliable in Bahasa Indonesia)
*Stories the Buddha Told*, 2001.
*Buddhist Stories from Many Lands*, 2005.